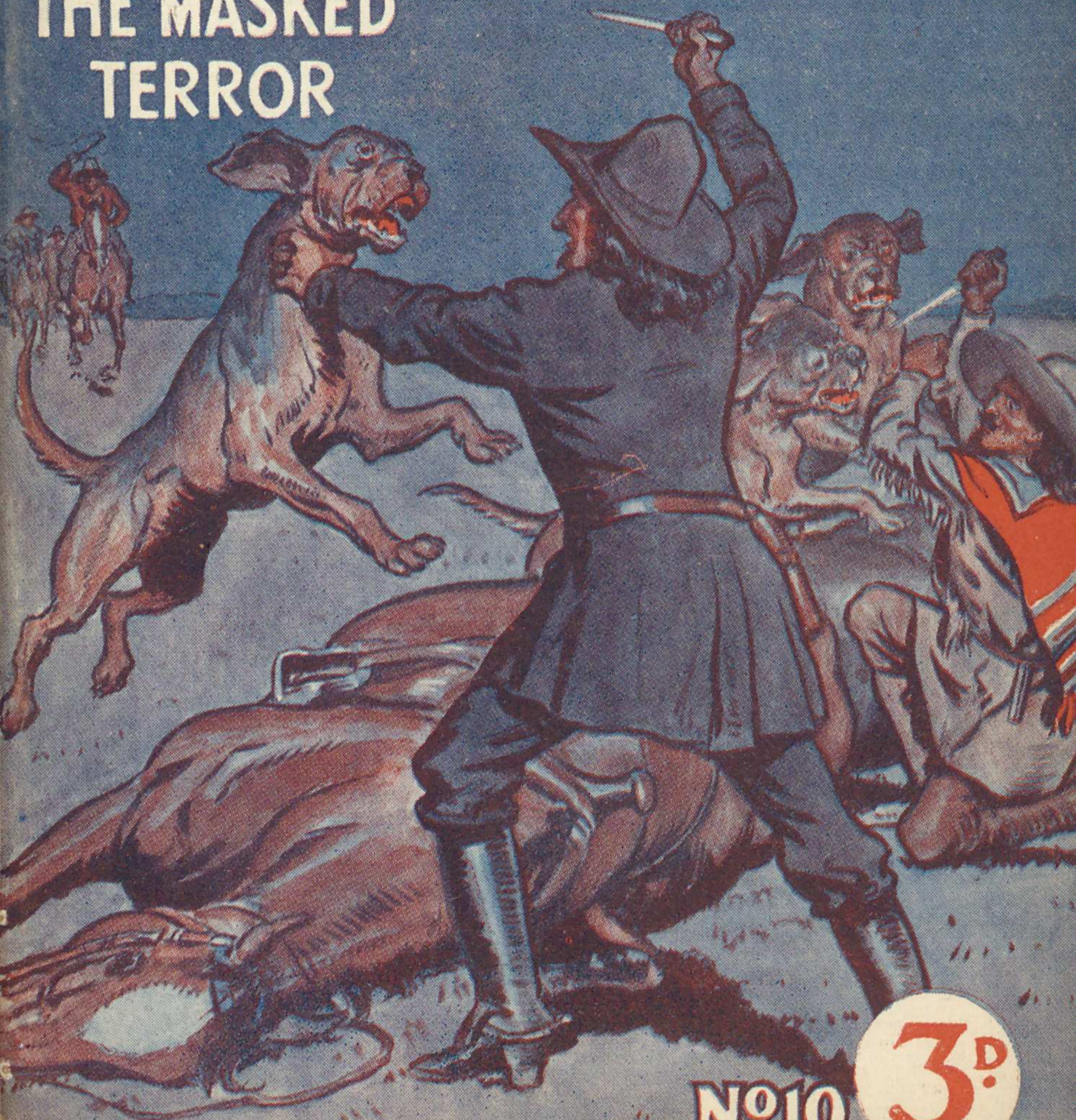


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THE MASKED TERROR



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THE MASKED TERROR

CHAPTER I

THE WONDERFUL EL GAMIN

DEL NORTE !

The Monaco of America.

The liveliest little town of its size in Southern Colorado. It is situated upon the south bank of the Rio Grande river, near where it turns out of the San Luis valley from its eastward course, and runs nearly direct south through New Mexico.

The town is rather prettily laid out, with a few streets, and maybe a hundred dwellings, some of which are generally unoccupied. And you need not be surprised to find a gambling den in each of these tenanted habitations.

For women gamble in Del Norte as well as in Monaco, and some of the black-eyed Spanish girls are adepts at cards, and at winning hearts.

But the main resort of this town, of which the world knows so little, is the "Oriental Palace," a noble structure of Mexican build, artistically finished and richly furnished, with only one floor and a balcony up near the awning roof, where two bands discourse music the whole day and part of the night, a decoy to draw unsuspecting strangers into the master gambling room of Western America.

There was but one floor, but upon this floor and in under the roof far above, you could pack away half a dozen average buildings.

Imagine a tiled floor as smooth and evenly-laid as a glass surface, three hundred feet long by two hundred wide, and fitted with luxurious chairs and sofas of Mexican manufacture, marble-top card, faro and keno tables, with accompanying appliances, and long bars behind which all kinds of drinks from champagne to Taos whisky are kept, dispensed, and carried by Mexican girls, in short dresses, blue stockings and red slippers.

From above come softly-modulated strains of bewitching music, below are gracious, fascinating señoritas; the average man needs but to step inside this palace, and he is a "goner," so long as his cash holds out.

It was one evening at the beginning of December—the close of Del Norte's nearly perpetual summer. The night was breathless and sultry, with only a very faint breeze fanning up from the sullen, dark waters of the murmuring Rio Grande, as it swept by through its channel to the far-away Gulf.

The Oriental Palace was nevertheless crowded—crowded with men of rough, and men of dashing appearance; women whom dissipated life had wrecked of their personal charms, and women and maidens who had but recently launched forth into this gay, wildly-reckless existence.

All the tables were full to-night, and many were there strolling about through the great building, some alone and distrustful, and others in company with fascinating señoritas, or gay cavaliers. A great colonization caravan had that day stopped in Del Norte, to remain a week for repairs and to stock up, and to this was owing the fact of such a great attendance at the Oriental.

There was a table at which presided a man named Captain Bill Monte, who challenged the world at that simple but interesting game, dominoes—a game, by the way, which you are not likely to find in the general gambling den.

But this Capt. Monte was an expert, and his little game won him nearly as much as other "peelers" won from higher games. He had a system of gambling by dominoes which I have seen in but one place East, and that was in Philadelphia. This game in Del Norte they call *eloire*.

Captain Monte was a large, smooth-faced man, dark in complexion, with a low, beetling forehead, piercing black eyes, and a habitual expression of evil cunning worn upon his face.

Around Monte's *eloire* table this evening, a crowd had collected, watching the wonderful game of luck and science.

Monte sat upon his side of the table, coolly winning the game at every deal, and fleecing an impetuous Southern youth, a member of the caravan, by the way, out of his last shilling.

At last the Southerner arose from the table, a desperate expression upon his haggard face—a wild gleam in his eyes, that strong drink had rendered bloodshot.

"You have robbed me of my last penny, you devil!" he hissed, between his clinched teeth, "but I've not had enough yet. I'll rob my wife of her money and stake it, but what I will get back that which I have lost. Then, if I win, I'll put a bullet through your skull!"

Monte smiled, and nodded, as the youth, whose creole blood had been fired, shook his fist and strode away.

"Look out for a suicide directly!" he laughed, grimly. "Any gentleman got confidence enough in his dominoistic abilities to take a game?"

"There is!" a voice immediately replied, and a young man of handsome figure and stately carriage, pushed forward through the crowd. "I have just cleaned out the heaviest faro bank in the establishment, and if you've got any money to lose, now is your chance to lose it!"

And the stranger folded his arms across his chest and gazed coolly at Bill Monte.

No one had seen him in Del Norte before; that he was a stranger was certain, when Bill Monte knew him not. His attire was American, although a Spanish serape, fringed with a chain of pure gold, was worn over his athletic shoulders.

"And you think you can clean me out just as easily as you cleaned out the faro bank, eh?" Bill Monte chuckled, as he dexterously mixed the dominoes. "Do you understand the game we play?"

"Perfectly, sir," the other replied, counting out a number of bills from a huge wallet. "My name is El Gamin, if you want to know with whom you are to play."

The game then began.

Six bouts were played, with the most game on Monte's side, but then El Gamin blocked it upon deuces, and Monte was forced to rake in the undrawn dominoes.

Again the game began. Again he won! Not only once, but ten times; ten straight games, at the end of which he came off twenty-five hundred dollars ahead of investment.

Bill Monte was by this time furious with rage at his ill-luck.

"You are a devil!" he cried; "you have infatuated these bones. But you shall either lose or win all. I have eight thousand dollars in the Denver Bank, and it is the last I have in the world, for you've cleaned me; and I'll bet that eight thousand dollars I win the next game!"

"I accept!" said El Gamin, almost unconcernedly.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE MESSAGE

GREAT excitement now prevailed.

The news spread like wildfire through the palace gambling-house: crowds surged around the *eloire* table; all other games were suspended, and the gambling-tables loaded down with eager men and women, who wished to get a glimpse at this wonderful domino-monarch, El Gamin, who was to play Bill Monte for all he was worth. And half a hundred of Bill Monte's backers, who were herdsmen and of the most ruffianly type of men, stood close at hand, ready to "climb" this new light in the gaming arena, should Bill Monte give the word.

And as many or more Del Norteans stood, with hands resting upon revolvers, ready to back El Gamin, if necessary, for Bill Monte was hated and feared by all, and the Del Norteans held a grudge against him worth wiping out.

As the game was of so large a figure, no checks were purchased on deposit money; Monte gratuitously furnished these, and the game began. And the game ran:

Monte led with double five, making ten: El Gamin blank-five—also ten: Monte six-five: El Gamin blank-six; Monte drew eight dominoes, and played tray-five; and so ran the game, El Gamin eventually blocking the game on blanks.

Monte swore like a trooper, and as if to intimidate his opponent, drew a six-shooter and laid it upon the table. El Gamin stared a moment; then repeated this performance, his revolver being a heavy Derringer, of large bore.

"Guess you meant shoot, didn't you?" he said, laying his down, already cocked.

"Guess you'll find out!" Bill Monte growled, sullenly, glancing at the cheque he had written, to see that no one had disturbed it. "Go on."

They played and Monte won. Each had fifty to go, now; game, two hundred. And they played—and Monte won! With a yell of delight he made a

grab for the stakes, but his countenance instantly came in contact with the muzzle of El Gamin's revolver.

"Hold!" El Gamin cried, sternly. "Those stakes are not yours. You have cheated! Look, gentlemen—a four deuce played upon the double six, does not make fifteen. Nor can we call this a game; so we will play over!"

The crowd saw the mistake now, and Bill Monte saw that his attempt to cheat had been in vain. The dominoes were reshuffled, and the game finished, El Gamin winning, just five ahead of his opponent.

Instantly upon laying down the game bone, he seized his revolver in time to cover Monte who was in the act of raising his.

"No fancy games!" the victor cried, grimly, raking in the stakes, and stowing them away in his pocket. "I won fairly!"

"You're a liar and a cheat!" Monte roared, with a frightful curse. "I'll give half o' my share ter ther man that'll shoot him dead, boys. Hurra!"

With an answering yell the herdsmen sprang forward toward the strange gambler expert. But, at the same time the Del Norteans made a rush upon them, and there in that Oriental Palace took place a bloody affray, which the men of Del Norte won, only because of superiority of numbers. And when the battle was over, and a dozen dead and dying lay stretched out upon the blood-stained floor, it was found that El Gamin was gone.

Down the beautiful San Luis valley, about ten miles from Del Norte, and upon the banks of the Rio Grande, was a pretty little homestead, consisting of an ancient Mexican hacienda, built of adobes, and a number of out-buildings, all set down upon a prairie-plot of green, which was guarded on three sides by a white picket fence, and sloped gently down to the water's edge.

Back from the building rolled mile after mile of gentle, undulating prairie, a large portion of it devoted to stock grazing, while here and there were patches of grain and corn, showing that agriculture was not neglected.

Upon these herding-plains, each man has his own individual tract, generally square in shape, with each corner marked off with a tall pole; and it means war to trespass upon those grounds belonging to another, even if only stepping across a line, unless you have a passageway bargained for.

Thus, in the San Luis valley, lanterns are hoisted upon the tops of these claim-marking poles, of various colours of light, presenting

a strange appearance if seen upon a particularly dark night, or in a clear one.

Two men and a pack of well-trained Mexican shepherd dogs are all that is generally required to watch a herd, one change going on at noon and coming off at midnight, and *vice versa*. The dogs soon learn the limits allowed for grazing, and need few directions to keep the herds within their proper bounds.

The homestead we have described was handsomely located, in sight of Del Norte—indeed there were no neighbours nearer, except one family farther down the valley, the larger share of the herders living farther inland.

And to this sequestered spot, by Rio Grande Del Norte's murmuring waters, Edward Harris had come, when in his *balloon* he had sailed away from Eureka, up in Idaho.

It is useless, perhaps, to tell the reader who Edward Harris is, for as Deadwood Dick he is now well known to many thousands of readers.

Deadwood Dick, the prince of road-agents, once, but now a reformed man, leading the honest life of cattle-herder.

One pleasant sunny afternoon, a few days after the event last narrated, the happy little group were gathered under the trees upon the lawn in front of the hacienda, which sloped gently to the water's edge.

Deadwood Dick had thrown himself upon the lawn, while Leone sat in a huge bamboo chair in front of him, her gaze resting upon his handsome face and form lovingly.

Little Dick, but a few months old, was upon the grass near by, crowing loudly as the birds sang, and kicking up his heels in babyish delight.

"And how like you the new home, darling?" young Harris asked.

"Like it?" Leone repeated, glancing about her half dreamily. "I like it more than I can tell, dear Eddie. I like it anywhere where you are."

"And home would be no home without you, my peerless. Here, in this beautiful home, if the world will leave me alone, I can end my days in peace and bliss with you, my darling; and hunger not for the old wild life."

"Ah! but how I fear this beautiful home will not long hold us both, Prince," the girl-wife replied sadly. "Something seems to tell me that we are to again experience trouble—that we are going to be parted again, perhaps forever."

"Pooh! you have the blues a little over something that has not gone right. What is it, pet?" and he drew her down beside him on the soft carpet of grass.

"Nothing I know of yet, dear husband," she replied, nestling fondly in his arms. "But I got to thinking what if we *should* be separated, when we are so happy?"

"It would be a bitter blow indeed, my peerless; but we will not think of such a thing. Here we have all that heart can desire, except neighbours, which are few and far between."

At this juncture there were footsteps heard, and a wiry little old man, accompanied by a billy-goat, of the ugliest of countenances, came striding up, from the prairie, rifle in hand.

He was clad in a hunting suit of buckskin, with top-boots and herder's slouch hat; yet we have no difficulty in recognizing our friend of bygone days, Old Avalanche.

Both Dick and Leone smiled their welcome, as the veteran Annihilator approached.

"Where have you been, to-day, uncle?" asked Leone, for that was what she and Dick often called the old scout, he seemed so near to them; "roaming on the plains, I suppose?"

"Yas, out a-tryin' my new 'oss, ma'am; but he ain't no seech anymile as my old Prudence Cordeliar war, I tell you. Prudence ked sling off a shoe an' hit a red nigger wi' the utmost *sang froid* ye ever see'd. By ther way, Dickey, boyee, here's a queer little message thet ther gal they call the Prairie Patrol sent ter ye thru yer 'umble servant"; and the old man, after considerable fumbling in his pockets, produced an enveloped message and handed it to Deadwood Dick.

"Hello! what does this mean?" the ex-Prince exclaimed in surprise, as he tore the wrapper. "Leone, what do you suspect? See! it is directed to me—Deadwood Dick."

Leone grew white instantly, for she believed that a terrible blow was impending.

The message read as follows

"Deadwood Dick, you are in deadly danger. You need counsel, which I cannot give you on paper. Keep out of Del Norte; you have two hundred enemies there, and among the herders. Meet me down the river, at the ruined ranch, to-night, at moonrise.

"LESTIE, PRAIRIE PATROL."

CHAPTER III

"THE ARKANSAS TOOTHPICK"

THAT night was beautiful in the extreme, in the picturesque mountains and on the

grazing prairies of Southern Colorado, soft moonlight striking here and there upon little Spanish-American towns of adobe, or an occasional village of Navajoes in some wild, lonely spot.

Several miles up the San Luis valley from the home of the Harrises was a large tract of timber extending from the river, which rolled sullenly through the centre of the valley, across a southern grazing prairie, finally connecting with the mountains, miles in the hazy distance. This timber seemed to form a sort of chain across the valley, and from its dark, gloomy appearance had taken the name of Black Woods.

On the banks of the Rio Grande, as it flowed through one end of this Black Woods, was a ruined hacienda of adobe, which to all appearance had not been tenanted for many years—probably not since the Spanish settlers first invaded this country of gold. It was, in every sense of the word, a ruined and ghostly old place.

And on this night the soaring full moon up in the dome of heaven, threw a ghastly flood of light down upon the ruins, and upon a tragic scene in the deserted glade. No—not deserted, for in its centre stands a tree with outspreading branches, and to one of these a dark object is suspended by means of a stout rope.

As we approach nearer, we are able, by aid of the flood of weird moonlight, to define this spectacle, and make it out to be the body of a man, hung by the neck.

The stillness is profound, until, when the moon reaches a point almost directly overhead, there are sounds of horse's feet heard close at hand, and half a dozen coyotes sneak out from the hacienda, and into the wood.

Then, after considerable noise, and a number of rather broad expressions of indignation, a horseman emerged suddenly into the glade.

Apparently astonished to find himself out of the timber tangle, he leaned back in the saddle and pulled with all his strength upon the reins, succeeding finally in bringing his steed, a very ugly-tempered and obstinate mule, to a halt.

"Whoa-r-r!" the stranger sang out, with a peculiar nasal twang, as he succeeded in fetching the beast to a standstill.

A strange pair were this stranger and his mule—as odd in appearance as one is often likely to meet on the Overland trail.

The man was a seven-footer if he was an inch in height, and as lank and gaunt as a prairie-wolf after a severe winter. Evidently there was not a spare pound of flesh about him, and if he had been accustomed to good

living, it had in no way affected him as to corpulency. He was rather illy proportioned, too, for the longest portion of his person was his legs, his trunk or body being strangely dwarfed, and his neck long and crane-like. Upon this latter was perched a head almost twice the size of that of an ordinary mortal, covered with a straggling, matted shock of sandy hair, that fell half-way down to his waist. His arms were equally long with his legs; and his face was covered to the eyes with a red, shaggy beard, which almost touched his belt. His eyes were black and magnetic, and shaded by a broad-brim herder's hat, with the rim turned down; while his remaining habiliments consisted of a suit of corduroy and top-boots. In his belt he carried both revolvers, knife and lasso, while a handsome rifle was slung at his back.

"Whoa-r-r!" repeated this strange individual, though the mule was stationary for the time being—"whoa-a-r-r, consarn ye, an' let yer lord-an'-master make an observatory o' thes leetle place. Hullo! darn my old sow's last litter o' pigs! what in all creat'on aire thet hangin' ter yander limb—a man? Aire this a graveyard or seminary, ther great Toothpick o' Arkansas hes stumbled inter—a sort o' cryptogram whar anshent Aztecs hang up corpses ter dry. Holy sulphurous fires of anshent Jerusalaam!"

Dropping the reins, the Arkansas Toothpick dropped his feet to *terra firma*, and walked straight ahead toward the grim spectacle in the moonlight, passing over the mules' head without any trouble.

At length he paused before the suspended body, and gazed at it speculatively.

"Humph!" was his next grim comment, as he ingulfed a huge quid of tobacco, "et aire a sad sight ter parseeve a feller human in them distressed circumstances, I sw'ar. Judith, ye old beast, cum hayr, wi' my writin' materials, w'ile I write thes poor cuss's obituary."

According to orders, the mule came forward to the giant's side, but cast a suspicious eye at the corpse swinging in the breeze.

"Sho! ye needn't be skeart, old gal, at thet scarecrow!" the Toothpick assured, as he began to write upon some paper. "Ye've seen wuss funerals nor thet, in yer lifetime, I tell ye."

Busily wrote this uncouth man from Arkansas, and at length he finished and pinned the notice, which was penned upon half a sheet of foolscap paper, in large, sprawling letters, upon the clothing of the suspended corpse. Then he stepped back, with a grim chuckle, and contem-

plated his work with evident satisfaction.

"Guess we've done about ther extent o' our pile, Judith, so we might as well mog along."

Saying which the eccentric ranger spread his legs apart, and the sagacious animal aimed between them, and Toothpick sat down into the saddle without any ado.

"Now, g'lang, ye beast, an' none o' yer funny bizness, fer we're goin' ter reach Del Norte ter-night, or bu'st ther b'iler!"

And away trotted the little mule, with his ludicrous burden, across the glade.

Soon they were out of sight in the wood, and things in that lonely glade once more resumed their ghostly appearance.

But what was this message the strange individual had left upon the body of the unlucky young man, whoever he might be, who had been lynched in the glade?

The paper was lit up by the light of the weird moon, and revealed the following words, written in rude scrawls:

"Jem Surrat Murry, Eskwire, ther 'original' Toothpick from Arkansas, desires ter announce thet he found this corpuss hangin' ter a limb an' rendered a coroner's verdick o' died o' a tightness in ther weazand. Take warning, ye sinners, for ef ther original Toothpick frum Arkansas ever gits a clutch at ye, ye're bound to shake hands wi' a devil.

"Yours trooly, JEM MURRAY."

The wagon-train containing the colonizationists, had camped just out of Del Norte, on the western side of the town and upon the river-bank.

The caravan was a large one, containing in all a hundred "schooners" drawn by oxen, a large stud of horses, and about sixty families, mostly from Pennsylvania and New York.

On the day that the caravan camped without the town, those belonging to it were visited by a number of curious Del Norteans, and not a few decoys were offered to induce the young men and maidens into the town, and to that den of wholesale and retail robbery by cards, the Oriental.

But there were two of the young men who did not go.

They refused all solicitations, and after dark that evening, met upon the prairie, outside of the town.

Both were handsome young fellows of two-and-twenty years, well-built and physically developed, and their names were respectively Redwood and Arlington. Fred Arlington was the better tempered of the two, and a more general favourite. Dean

Redwood was a good fellow in his way, but one of those whom you have to get thoroughly used to ere you can say that you like them.

He was a native of Montana, he stated; had joined the train only a few days' travel beyond Del Norte, with the expressed intention of making one of the colony.

And these two young men now met upon the dark prairie, and confronted each other, with savage looks and drawn revolvers.

"At last we are alone, Dean Redwood!" young Arlington cried, in a stern, ringing voice, that betrayed how intense was his bitterness and hatred.

"I believe so," Redwood assented, with a nod and a glance about. "Your invitation out here was at first a matter of surprise, but after due reflection, I concluded it was caused by your jealousy toward me for having a few words to say to your affianced, Miss Ada Belldon."

"That for one reason, you dog. You have instilled poison into her mind, or infatuated her, the devil only knows which. Do not think I do not recognize you, sir, for I do. We have met before."

"Yes, we have met before," Redwood replied, grimly, "and the recollections I have of you are none too pleasing, I assure you. When I think of the loving girl you enticed from me and betrayed to death, I felt like catching you by the throat and choking the life out of you."

"No doubt you joined the train for some such a purpose!" sneered Arlington.

"No matter about my object in joining the caravan," replied Redwood. "I saw the lovely girl you were trying to entrap, as you would have entrapped poor Lena Alden, had not death first interfered. And now, sir, I confess I warned her of your past history, and to look out for you as she would for snakes."

"Yes, I know you did, and by so doing, made it necessary for me to call this interesting meeting."

"What do you want?"

"Your life—and you want mine!"

"No, I have no desire in that direction. The great hereafter will be time enough to avenge Lena Alden's wrongs. I do not want your life."

"But I want yours, and will have it, or die as I would have you die."

"Very well. If you will risk your life in trying to kill me, your fate be upon your own head. Shall it be revolvers?"

"Yes; as well end the work with them as any other weapons!"

The two foes then measured off a proper distance, and took their places.

"We will count in concert, and fire at the word three. Are you ready?" from Redwood.

"Perfectly!" Arlington replied, as with a trembling hand he raised a revolver on a line with his face, which was deathly pale.

"All right then—one!"

In which Arlington joined.

"Two!" from both in sternly ringing voices. Then came—"Three! Fire!"

CHAPTER IV

THE PRAIRIE PATROL

GREAT was the surprise of Deadwood Dick, at the contents of the strange message Old Avalanche had brought him, coming as it did from the mysterious Patrol of the Prairies. And he had company in his wonderment, for the great Annihilator and Leone shared it with him.

"What can it mean? Who does it signify—this word, enemies? Can it be that the old foes from Deadwood have trailed me, even here?" the young ex-road agent said, gazing thoughtfully at the paper. "Or is this some trap to decoy me to death? By Heaven! I'd give a deal to have this riddle solved."

"Oh! Dick!" Leone exclaimed. "I fear that, as I said, our home is to be broken up—that we are to be separated. Don't go to meet this strange woman, whose designs you know not."

"Ah! my dear, but I must go. If I were to let this warning go unheeded, it might be the means of the death of all of us. Avalanche, will you order my horse, please?"

"Yes, Dickey, b'ye. But let me advise ye ter take this great boreal disease along wi' ye."

"No, scout, you had best remain here, and guard Leone and my boy, for there is no foretelling what may happen, at any moment. We are alone and in a land of strangers, and undesirable ones, too, for these Spanish-Mexican cattle-herders are but a band of border-ruffians—men who'd as soon fight as eat!"

"All right, b'ye; I'll stay and do guard duty, an' ef ennything happens, you can calcy late that Avalanche didn't go down wi'out fightin' fer your darlin's!" and then the Annihilator turned away, wiping a suspicious moisture out of the corner of his eyes. For he loved the Harrises, did that grim old veteran.

After he had gone, Deadwood Dick arose and paced moodily to and fro across the lawn, his brows knitted, and a sigh occasion-

ally escaped his lips; while, with Master Dick in her arms, Leone sat upon the grass, watching her handsome prince, with proud, tearful gaze.

At last he turned to Leone, none of the moody expression gone from his brow.

"Cheer up, little woman, and trust in Avalanche to protect you while I'm gone. He will do it as well as I could, if not better. Adieu, now!"

He bent over and kissed her and the babe repeatedly; then vaulted upon the back of a handsome black horse which a peon had brought and was dashing away, waving his hat back in farewell parting.

The sun was just sinking upon the edge of the horizon, and he knew it would be close on to night ere he reached the ruined ranch, so he urged his steed into a gallop, and dashed on over the prairie, keeping near to the river shore.

Night's sombre shadows were thickening rapidly, when he came into the immediate neighbourhood of the wood. Only for the moon that was rising out of an eastern prairie billow, the darkness would have been intense. As he neared the forest, Deadwood Dick drew his revolvers from their holsters, and placed fresh cartridges in the cylinders, and turned his knife to a handy position, for he knew not how soon he might have occasion to use one or both.

Then he urged his horse forward to the edge of the wood, and dismounted. Securing the animal so that he could not wander away, he stepped stealthily into the timber, and made his way toward the ruined hacienda—not boldly, but cautiously, with all his senses upon the alert for danger.

He meant to prevent a surprise, if possible. Every few steps he paused to listen, and peered sharply around him, at every object which he thought might dissolve into a human form.

At last, after full half an hour of stealthy prowling, he reached the glade in front of the hacienda, and paused on the edge.

Before him was the old ruin, looking weird and ghostly; but that ghastly sight which the Arkansas Toothpick had seen, later in that same night, was not suspended from the limb of the tree.

And after an hour of watching, without reward, he was put in the way of making a discovery.

There came the tramp of a horse's feet, and the mysterious female Patrol of the Prairies rode into the glade, upon the back of a powerful black steed, a near mate to the one Deadwood Dick had left out on the edge of the wood and prairie. In her arms,

and partly resting across her saddle-bow, the Patrol carried a heavy burden.

This Deadwood Dick had no difficulty in making out as a man's body, and a natural curiosity possessed him to know the meaning of these strange movements of this strange woman. That she was beautiful he could easily perceive, for the moonlight shone full in her face, as she drew rein.

The Prairie Patrol drew rein in under the tree, and glanced around her, cautiously.

"I am alone," she said, in a tone loud enough that her words were audible to the watcher in the edge of the glade. "El Gamin did not fall into the trap I laid for him, because he is a coward. He recognized my writing, no doubt, and like a shy fox, he has kept within his hole. But, it will not avail him. Bill Monte and the Prairie League owe him a grudge, and Wild Lestie will be revenged through them, who kneel at the shrine, as heathen worship before their golden idols!"

Thus fiercely spoke the beautiful Patrol; then with a start she fixed her gaze upon the face of the man she had carried in her arms.

"Ha! why should I complain? I have one of those who put the blight upon my life, and though another killed him, I have his body. Fred Arlington, even though you are dead—dead and cold, never more to return to life—I hate you, I *hate* you! Truly Dean Redwood sent the bullet through his brain, and I would love him for it, but that I have another work to perform. El Gamin has dared to come back, but he shall not escape the avenging hand of Wild Lestie—ha! ha! no; he and his wife and child shall die!"

In his hiding, Deadwood Dick started violently, as the latter part of her speech was heard, and a sudden faintness assailed him.

"My God!" he gasped, as a sudden thought flashed across his brain, "can it be that it is I whom she mistakes for this El Gamin? By heaven! I believe I have solved the mystery. She has decoyed me here, to murder me, and while I am here, this Bill Monte and the 'Prairie League' of whom she speaks, are attacking my home and slaughtering my wife and child!"

But in the meantime the strange woman, Prairie Patrol, was speaking:

"Yes, they shall all die, curse them, to avenge the ruined life of Wild Lestie. El Gamin dead, there are but two more to follow ere the record of vengeance is complete. Ha! ha! Fred Arlington, you, the basest villain of the lot, dead first, but not by my hand. Dean Redwood should have died just the same as you, but he was spared. He must follow, also! Ha! I will lynch Fred

Arlington even tho' he is no longer of the living and can not feel the torture."

Her resolve was apparent.

She held the body evenly balanced across the horse's neck, and then uncoiled a long lasso from about the saddle-bow. One end she dexterously formed into a slipping noose, and shirred about the neck of the corpse: then she tossed the other over the nearest limb above her.

It went over and came down, and then with a display of considerable strength, she drew the dead colonist up into mid-air, and fastened the rope about his arm-pits, so that he was securely hung.

Then, upon sudden impulse, apparently, she plunged the spurs into the animal's flanks, and dashed out of the glade.

But Deadwood Dick had preceded her, and mounted upon his own fleet steed, was dashing over the prairies at a mad rate of speed.

For an unnatural glow reflected against the eastern sky told him that there was need of him at the ranch—that trouble was occurring there!

CHAPTER V

A NIGHT OF DEATH

AFTER the departure of Deadwood Dick, Old Avalanche joined Leone Harris upon the lawn, where she still sat, weeping softly over her babe.

"Cheer up, my little leddy!" the grim veteran said, comfortingly, "for thar's allus a calm after er squall, they say. Great ham-bone thet dislocated ther jaw of old Joner! w'at ye cryin' at, annyhow? Cryin' are a bad habit, I've hearn tell."

"Oh! you are kind, sir, in your attempts to cheer, but I cannot help weeping, for I have a premonition of danger; an awful fear assails me, that peril greater than we suspect, surrounds us. Oh! Dick! why did you go? We shall never meet again!"

"Tut! tut!" poohed the Annihilator, but with less joviality than before, for somehow he had become possessed of this strange foreboding—"tut! tut! child; don't cry ernuther bit. I'll warrant Dickey'll cum back. He's not ther boy ter desert a friend long, when it is possible to help it. Cum inter ther house, ma'am, and in thar ye won't feel so lonesome, I'll bet; eh! junior Dick?" And the Annihilator caught the crowing infant in his arms, and bounded gaily away toward the hacienda.

Leone arose to her feet, with a sigh, and followed in their wake.

Presently Leone noticed a glowing red

light out upon the prairie, too low for one of the poled-claim handmarks, and yet a light shining with such brilliancy as to reflect against the moonlit sky, apparently growing steadily in size.

She called the Annihilator's attention to it, with a startled scream.

"Look! look! see yonder light upon the prairie? What does it mean? Oh! heaven, can it mean that our enemies have——"

She paused and watched the face of the old scout for her answer.

He stood just without the window, and gazed fixedly at the light, his eyes reaching forth with nearly as much strength as in their youth.

At first the expression upon his face was indifferent, but it gradually became so grim, that she was forced to arouse him, so frightened she grew.

"Oh! tell me—tell me; is it danger?"

"Slathers an' haydoogins of it! My gal, ef I ain't mistaken, thar's deviltry afoot, and I'll bet my old hat on it. Thet perarie aire *afire*, off yonder, in a holler, an' ye ken't see it so good; but wait till she boils over ther hill, an' ye'll observe how she'll come a-whoopin' toward us!"

"Oh! merciful heaven! is this true? Oh! what shall we do? Let's flee, while the fire is yet at a distance!" Leone cried, clasping Dickie to her breast.

"Yas, I opine et would be a good ijee, onless ther devil's imps, whoever they aire, hev surrounded ther ranch, in which case we'll hev ter fight like a Spanish bull. You take the kid and go down to the river-bank, while I hunt up the old flat-boat and launch it. Ef we can't get out o' thes deeficulty, I'm hanged if et won't be quare!"

Leone, in accordance with Avalanche's orders, hurried at once down across the lawn to the banks of the Rio Grande, only pausing for a few wraps as she passed through the house.

But it was a fatal action on her part.

In the meantime, Avalanche left the hacienda by a rear door, and strode toward the commodious barn, against one end of which leaned a large flat-boat, evidently long gone into disuse, although it was still stanch and stout.

It had occurred to the old man upon instant thought, that this was the very thing they must use if they hoped to make their escape.

Tearing aside the vines that had grown upon the boat, he was about to attempt to drag it toward the river, when he heard a shout, and saw three men rush around the corner of the barn, with drawn pistols.

"Thar the old badger is; shoot him down!" yelled one, firing even as he spoke, and before the Annihilator could draw a weapon. The bullet took effect in the old man's chest, and he dropped upon one knee with a pitiful moan. He knew by the sensation of that wound, and the blood that spurted from it, that his hours on earth must be numbered, with a leaden mark.

But, hero to the verge of death, as he was, he was not vanquished, but drew a revolver in either hand, and waved them in defiance over his head, a wild triumphant expression upon his grim, stubbly, sunburnt face.

"Keep off!" he yelled, and then his revolver cracked spitefully, and then two of the border ruffians went down. But the next instant a band of half a score swarmed around from behind the barn, and upon them did the brave old scout fire, until his last cartridge was gone, and a fifth bullet in his body caused him to drop back, in exhaustion and insensible.

Ah! that was a ride for life with Deadwood Dick, after he left the Black Woods, and saw the reflection of fire lighting up the eastern sky. He did not stop to ask of himself the meaning, now; he knew full well it meant danger and perhaps death—death to his loved ones.

On—on Deadwood Dick urged his animal, at the top of its speed—on—on, over prairie hill and prairie valley, sparing neither spur nor lash!

A terrible horror assailed the flying horseman, as, when he was yet three miles away, he saw the awful fiery spectacle engulf his pretty home—saw the barn and outbuildings ignite and add to the conflagration. The hacienda was outwardly imperishable, being built of well-laid adobes.

On—on, closer and closer the wild horseman draws to the track of the flames, then he jerks his steed back upon its haunches suddenly as an apparition rises out of the grass just ahead of him—a wild-looking, hatless man, with blood-besmeared garb.

"Great God! is that you, Avalanche, old boy?" burst from Deadwood Dick's lips; but the next instant the figure staggered—fell—went down in the grass again out of sight.

With an exclamation, and a misgiving in his heart, Harris threw himself off his horse and ran forward.

He found the old Annihilator stretched upon the ground just where he had fallen, with very little of life in him. In some unaccountable way the brave old hero had crawled out of the track of the fire, in time to escape a fiery death.

Deadwood Dick knelt by his side, and clasped one of the veteran's horny old palms in his own.

"My God, Avalanche, this is awful!" he gasped, as he noted by the aid of the light of the fire the awful greyish pallor that was stealing over the old man's features. "Are you very badly wounded, dear friend?"

A faint smile played about the old scout's mouth for a moment; then he slowly opened his eyes.

"Yes, I'm done for sure, Dickey, b'yee, an' no mustake," was the faint reply.

"They cum onter me too fast, an' I couldn't play a trump every time, ag'in' their deal. They put five bullets inter me, an' I'm gettin' too old ter stan' more'n three at one time, ye kno'. Guess thes aire ther Annihilation's last trail tergether, ontill ther great eternal 'un. Somehow, I've hed a notion ever sence we cum frum ther nor', that these war onhealthy lattytudes an' longytoads fer me. Poor little boy; God took the old man, and the babe too, to keep him company!"

"What! Merciful God! do not tell me my child is dead!" Deadwood Dick cried, reeling back, blinded by tears which had come as he watched the old hero fast sinking away. "Tell me of my wife and child, I pray, ere it is too late, Alva!"

"Ye-s!" the old martyr replied, dreamily, rubbing the clammy sweat from his forehead. "I'll try ter, tho' thar ain't much wind left in me, any more! Ther baby is dead. I fainted after the heathen herders shot me, but cum to jest as ther fire war cummin' cluss. My thoughts instantly went ter Leone an' yer boy, an' I staggered aroun' ther house ter ther lawn. I found 'em both—ther babe dead, an' Leone frightfully wounded—lyin' on ther river-bank. She prayed me ter take ther babe and fetch it out o' ther track o' the fire, an' then ef I c'u'd do et, ter cum back fer her. I fetched ther leetle angel, Dick, but, God forgive me, I hadn't ther strength ter go back fer yer wife!"

Here the old man broke down both with grief and exhaustion, and tears coursed down his furrowed cheeks; while Deadwood Dick with bowed head, wept as men seldom weep—wept with a heart full of bitterness and anguish—agony such as only the loss of loved ones by death can produce.

Presently the Annihilator summoned all his strength and spoke again, though his words were gasped and hardly audible:

"She had water for a choice frum the flames, b'yee; 'twas a better death, at least. You'll find your little angel boy lying in ther grass, yonder, where I laid

him to rest. Good-bye, Dickey, don't grieve. God will help you."

CHAPTER VI

OMAHA OLL

BACK to Del Norte's city of gambling we will go, some two weeks after the events just narrated, and witness a scene among strange characters, who are to take an active part in our story.

The home of the Harringtons was situated on the eastern side of Del Norte and upon the bank of the river, near where it debouches from the San Luis valley and rushes due southward.

The Harringtons were an eastern family, natives of New Hampshire, who had come to this country among the earliest of the settlers, and took up land then belonging to the Government, upon which they had settled, and now had, in addition to an excellent herding-ranch, a well-tilled farm, and a beautiful home, in the grim old Spanish hacienda, rambling and odd-shaped, which had stood by the river-side, ere they came.

There were five of the family, two sons, one daughter, and the parents, both hard-working, honest people, of mature age.

The daughter, Ella, was a young lady of nineteen, very pretty, as the word goes, with a face in which purity and goodness shone.

She was the pride of her parents, and esteemed by all who knew her.

Of the two sons, one was christened Hawk and the other Philip. The former received his name for his sharpness of glance, when yet but a boy.

He was now a man of seven-and-twenty years, strong and stalwart, with a thorough knowledge of the prairie and herding, and all the matters appertaining thereto; was a great favourite among the rough herders, and was rather the "boss" of the family.

Philip was a decided opposite of his brother, in nearly every particular.

He, with his father, tilled the farm, as a general thing, while Hawk was away looking after the herds upon the prairie.

One evening toward the middle of December, when a cold, raw north wind was blowing in across the plain, Hawk Harrington came riding madly in toward the hacienda upon the back of his spirited charger, which was flecked with foam, results of a long, hard ride. There was a savage, desperate expression upon the face of the rider—a face that was dark and cruel,

with fierce black eyes, hair, and heavy sweeping moustache—an expression of rage and of defiance, as occasionally he would glance over his shoulder at a group of a dozen masked horsemen that were hugging close in his rear.

Young Harrington was wounded in half a dozen places, and blood spurted from these wounds at every jolt; but he was a man of indomitable will and rugged constitution, which was all that kept him in the saddle.

On—on dashed the handsome brown racer over the yielding turf, and on came the pursuers with equal speed, occasionally giving a yell of command which, though the words were inaudible, Hawk knew were orders for him to halt.

On—on! the hacienda was yet a mile away; he could see its glimmering lights in the early evening—knew that there were strong hands and willing hearts within the grim adobe walls of the old home that would gladly sally forth to fight for him, could he but give them warning.

Bang! crack! came the report of two rifles, and a bullet whizzed by each side of his head.

"Ha! ha!" the fugitive cried, with a shout of defiance; "that kind of news from the returning-board is the style that suits me. How I would like to return my compliments, but the devils cut me off ere I could to horse and reach my weapons. On—on—on, Rocket!"

It seemed as though the noble steed was doing the very utmost within his power, but every yell of the herder seemed to urge him to greater efforts.

On—on—on! the last mile shortened rapidly, and with a great leap the noble steed of Hawk Harrington sprang over the five feet stone wall that encircled the hacienda, and fell dead, when the goal was reached.

For the pursuers had come to a halt after observing the leap of the gallant steed, and after a short consultation among themselves, turned back in the direction whence they had come, and galloped leisurely away.

Evidently they had concluded that the danger of besieging the hacienda was too great for them to incur, with so small a force.

Hawk Harrington had escaped death at the hands of these strange prairie rovers, but little more could be said. He was well pierced with bullets, and only a man of his strong constitution could ever have passed through the ordeal and lived.

But the care of an affectionate mother and sister; and a proper course of nursing soon brought him around, and though sore

and lamed, he was in the saddle again in two days.

But of his pursuit, and the cause thereof, he was reticent. Perhaps he did not know the cause; perhaps he had only a suspicion of it; anyhow, he would not converse on the subject.

On the following evening we lead the gentle reader once more into that notorious den of gambling, the Oriental Palace, of Del Norte.

The place was well filled as usual.

In consequence of the coolness of the evening, the bands occupied the floor instead of the great balconies, overhead, and wild strains of delighted music were wafted through the immense auditorium.

Bill Monte presided at the *eloire*-table, as usual, and the faro and keno games were in full blast. New sports had recently been added to the attractions at the Oriental, such as lifting matches for prizes, and jumping, boxing, and target-shooting; and the Wheel of Fortune man had also found a stall in the great palace wherein to let the man of money risk his all, and stand a chance of winning—or losing.

Around this game, if a game it can be justly called, which possesses its peculiar fascination, as well as other games, were collected a large group of men, some strangers, a few habitués of the Palace, and a share made up of herdsmen from the valley.

There were twelve cards, with four numbers on each, beginning at one, and running up as high as 48; each card retailed at five dollars, with fifty dollars in the pool, which left ten dollars to the manager of the enterprise at each whirl of the wheel, and fifty dollars to the lucky holder of the card whose number wins.

Of course the banker is constantly in pocket, and in good humour, which invariably reflects largely upon the crowd.

The game-wheel had been revolving steadily for an hour, with ready sale for the cards, and a young man lounging against the railing had been watching it narrowly, without venturing anything.

He was of medium height of Western men, straight and iron-cast in every limb, with broad shoulders, and depth of chest; and was attired in a well-fitting suit of black cloth, with top-boots and slouch *sombrero*. In a belt at his waist he carried revolvers, knife and lasso, and a full mask screened his face from view.

"Another sale, gentlemen; here's your chance to acquire a chance, and here's where you chance upon fortunes by luck.

Only one more card unsold, gents—here it is—who'll have—9, 10, 11, 12—who wants it?"

"I'll take it!" announced the masked man, laying down a five dollar bill, and receiving the card.

"And around she goes!" sang the game-keeper, and the wheel was given a vigorous whirl, buzzing swiftly at first, but settling down slowly, and stopping with number ten under the finger.

"Keep the card again," announced the winner, receiving the pool, and shoving out another V.

Again the wheel revolved, and again he won, the finger pointing to 11.

"Better change for luck, young man!" cried the gamesman, coming along and scooping up all the cards upon the board. "Who'll have 'em, gentlemen?"

"Hey; hallo! put my card back here!" cried the young gentleman in mask. "If you know when it's healthy for you, you won't take up my keards till I tell you to!"

And the individual in question held a cocked six-shooter in his white hand.

"Come, shove it back here, or I'll put you in a funeral way!"

A murmur of surprise ran through the audience, and with a growl the clerk threw down the card again, and received the awaiting note in exchange.

"Bet your life ye won't make on thet card again!" he leered.

"Don't be so sure about that, my gay knight!" was the cool reply. "See here!" and the young gentleman of cheek wrote on the blank side of the card, in a graceful hand, "There's my business sign, gentlemen—Omaha Oll. Mebbe ye never heard of me, down in this country?"

"Up in Omaha, you'll find my autograph written on every deck of keards in the city—Omaha Oll the Masked Terror—the imitator of George Washington, who never told a falsehood—the man that stood on his head on the top of the spire o' Trinity Church! That's the style of a sunflower you'll find me. Go on, old hoss; don't let me interrupt the bizness": and the stranger took a cigar from his lips, which were reached through an aperture in the brown mask, and blew out a tremendous cloud of perfumed smoke.

Around the gamekeeper whirled the wheel, spitefully, and when the finger pointed to the winning number, it was 14.

Omaha Oll gave vent to a queer little laugh, as he beheld the result.

"See here!" he said, again raising his revolver, "I'm in for havin' this bizness fair. Pilgrims, thet wheel's loaded heavily, on

one side, which makes it stop at 9, 10, 11, or 12, if not whirled too hard. The rim of the wheel on the lower side, there, is hollow.

"And then in that hollow space I'll wager my life against a cent you'll find a greater or less quantity of ballast, probably buck-shot. I've been watching here, fer an hour, ere I began playing!"

Frightful curses escaped the lips of the four villains who managed things behind the counter, and they whipped out their revolvers, in a business-like manner.

"Shoot away! plug it straight at me for all you're worth, you rascals!" cried Omaha Oll, "but first just put in your mind that I've sixty picked men, every one of them dead-shots, who only await my private signal ter rush inter this caboose and bu'st this gambling business and its votaries all into the middle of next week. If you don't believe it, just fire off one of your lead-slingers, and I'm bettin' you'll see lively business in this shebang, in short order. Go ahead with your funeral, if you want ter git onter yer ear because I exposed fraud!"

And restoring his revolver to his belt, the young bravo stood facing his enemies, with folded arms and form erect—daring them to begin what he had promised should be a lively affray.

CHAPTER VII

"TOOTHPICK" v. DUFFER

THE manipulators of the "wheel of fortune" hesitated at firing upon the young Nebraskan—hesitated, for they noted the ominous glitter of the black eyes that shone through the holes in his mask—hesitated, because of a rumour that was floating about to the effect that this Omaha Oll and his band had been seen repeatedly in the valley, and were rough-looking customers to handle.

Those gathered outside the ring offered the Bravo no molestation, for they were not too dumb to see that this quarrel, or what threatened to be a quarrel, had been made as much in their behalf as in that of the masked stranger, and it would be more than treacherous for them to interfere.

Yet there was one brawny border-giant among the crowd, immense and muscular of trunk and limb, standing six-foot-six in his boots, who seemed to take it upon himself to exert his energies in behalf of the gamblers, for he elbowed his way through the crowd, and slapped his great human paw down upon Omaha Oll's

shoulder, with a force that made the young man flinch.

"Hillo!" the giant roared, a terrible expression upon his great unshaven, stubbly face—"Hillo! ye young jackanapes. What d'ye say?"

"I say, keep yer paws to home!" replied he from Omaha, quickly squirming out of the other's grasp, and dealing him a deft blow in the pit of the stomach, which doubled Mr. Bully up like a jack-knife.

A roar like that from a small-sized lion escaped the giant, and with arms outstretched and eyes glaring, he rushed upon the youth as if he would annihilate him.

But at this instant there was a timely intervention, which was probably the luckiest thing that could have happened for the Masked Bravo, as he stood a small chance of victory in a war-hug with the burly bully of Del Norte—Old Jim Duffer was his name, and he was the undisputable "boss" wherever he roamed.

For at this juncture, when the giant sprang forward, intent upon crushing his adversary, the crowd parted, an iron-like hand seized him by the collar, and he was jerked back upon the floor quick enough to cause him to forget all of his past history.

"Thaire!" exclaimed a voice, and the whole of the attacking individual forced a passage into the ring, which had been formed—"thaire ye be, pilgrim, jest as 'ansum a whipped rooster as ther eyes of man ever rested on. L'arn ter take a feller o' yer size next time, won't ye—sum'-thin' o' my stature an' figger, fer instance!"

Bruised and enraged, Duffer crawled back to his feet, and eyed the newcomer savagely.

"Jem Murray!" he growled.

"The Arkansas Toothpick!" assented the other, politely raising his hat. "Et seems ye ain't fergot yer old friend, Jimsy, in ther days that hev dissolved inter atmosphere, sence we war rivals up in Little Yucatan, in Catamount Gulch. Apparently yer memory hesn't suffered a collapse!"

"You ter ——!" leered old Duffer, naming a place notoriously remarkable for its torrid temperature. "Guess I don't owe you nuthin', do I? Reckon ye stuck yer finger inter ther 'rong pie, ye long-gear'd baboon!"

"Sho! ye ain't got over yer bad habit o' callin' bad names, yit, Jimsy!" commented the seven-foot Toothpick, glancing scornfully down at his adversary. "Ner hain't growed none, either. Ye're a Lilliputian banty, Jimsy—a reg'lar leetle barkin' w'iffet, w'at never bites, onless he ken

snap at sum smaller fry than himself. W'y, Jimsy, w'at ever stunted yer growth? Ye're no more'n a mouthful!"

"When a hog possesses sech a goldurned trap like yourn!" retorted Duffer, angrily. "Don't compare birds wi' beasts!"

"Oh! o' course not, Jimsy—especially birds w'at wears white feather!"

"Hey! wa't ye say?" bellowed the other, beginning to prance about like an excited colt. "Whar's ther man thet durst say Jem Duffer ever showed ther white feather. Whar's thet ornery galoot? Show him ter me, thet I may manufacture him inter koyote fodder!"

"Ye needn't luck fur, Jimsy," spoke the man from Arkansas, grimly, "fer he's hyar, in ther blood an' flesh—Jem Murray, Toothpick and traveller!"

"You!—you durst call me white-featherite, ye durned, long-gear'd Barnum's What-is-it?"

"Solemnly, respectfully, feelingly and humanely, dear Jimsy, I do announce thet I durst!"

"Then, I'm goin' ter smash ye—stomp ye, punch ye, an' mutilate ye ontill ye can't stand alone!" cried the Del Norte bully, and drawing himself together, he made a violent lunge at the Toothpick.

They clinched, and then the contest of strength and resolve began, amid much excitement.

Back and forward weaved the two men, locked vice-like in each other's embrace; now lurching heavily to one side; now dragging each other fiercely; lifting, tripping and feinting; it was a marvellous sight to see two such giants baffle each other when both were infuriated.

Omaha Oll, who had been in a measure the cause of all this disturbance, stood by the counter in the same position of cool indifference he had occupied all along, enjoying the tussle full as much as any of the others.

"Hug him as ef he war yer sweetheart, Toothpick!" he cried, in a clear, ringing voice. "If you want any help, just call on me."

At last the bully made a misstep, Murray caught him on it, and both went down to the floor with a crash. Fortunately for him, Duffer's head struck hard enough to render him momentarily insensible; otherwise his countenance would probably have undergone the customary battering, which the Arkansas man kindly dispensed with, when he saw that his adversary was done with.

But he instantly rose to his feet, and

glanced around at the sea of faces, with a broad grin.

"Hurra! three cheers for the Arkansas Toothpick!" cried Omaha Oll, springing boldly on top of a table, and waving his slouch hat. "Hip! hip!" and three long cheers rose from the great surging crowd for the long-legged, lanky, ludicrous man from Arkansas.

In the tumult some overjoyed individual emptied the contents of his six-shooters ceilingward, causing a loud roar to go echoing through the great building.

Omaha Oll uttered a curse upon the action and clinched his hands about a pair of pistol-butts.

"Fly! fly!" he yelled, his stern, clear voice reaching every corner of the Palace.

"Some accursed fool, by firing off that revolver, has signalled for my men, the Black Avengers, Fly! fly! all you that would save your lives, for it will be useless for you to try to resist!"

Then, with an agile leap into midnight air, the Masked Terror went like a rocket over the heads of the electrified assemblage, struck the door, bounded through an open casement, and was gone.

And with his departure a motley crowd, numbering upward of a hundred black-clad, masked horsemen, burst into the great gambling palace, through windows, doors, and every accessible ground entrance, and from their revolvers came flash after flash, report after report, until a pandemonium of noises prevailed, and the room was clouded with smoke.

Screams of affright from the females and fearful curses from the Del Norteans arose on either side; dead and dying were lying under foot; in haste the gamblers hurled chairs and tables aside, and the lights were extinguished, leaving darkness reigning supreme.

This proved the salvation of those within the great hall, to a large extent, for under cover of darkness they were able to escape, and but very few of the Black Avengers' bullets made a count.

In five minutes after the lights were extinguished not a soul of the living were within the Palace, for the outlaws had also taken their departure.

And after that night a terrible dread of the Masked Terror and his Black Avengers prevailed in the little city by Rio Grande's sullen waters. Many were afraid to stir out after dark for fear of encountering the scourge, and the gambling Palace was not nearly as full as usual.

Upon every line-pole of the valley-herding plains for miles in either direction,

was pasted a printed notice, couched in the following words :

"NOTICE : To al whom it may concern ! The late fire upon the prairie, which destroyed the old El Gamin ranch and out-buildings, was attended by a massacre at the said ranch, and three—an old man, a mother and her baby boy, were the victims. This crime was committed by the Prairie League, a band of ruffian herders, who leagued together, are bound by oath to work together, sin for each other, murder for each other and die for each other. Each of the thirty herders and ruffians belonging to said League, all of whom were concerned in this latest outrage upon innocent herders and settlers, are *marked*, and we the Avengers and Regulators of the Rio Grande del Norte, shall do our duty until every dog has been hung or shot. The leaders' names are here given : Captain Bill Monte, old Jim Duffer, Dresden La Mort, Hawk Harrington and Hank Murdock. The names of the others are all known, and each shall meet his fate. The Red Cross will signify the band of the Black Avengers.

"OMAHA OLL."

CHAPTER VIII

ENEMIES MEET GENERALLY

WITHIN the hacienda of the Harringtons, all was neatness and comfort. Everywhere a fine taste of arrangement was displayed and evidences of a woman's hand in the work.

And pretty Miss Ella was the mistress now, for her mother was getting old and infirm. Ella was a good girl, free-spirited, well-educated, and well-liked ; indeed, she had two lovers who had already declared their passion for her. These were Dean Redwood, and a young dark-faced gentleman named Cyril Duane, who was surrounded with a film of mystery. With him Ella met in secret, they having a trysting-place on the shore of the river. Dean Redwood came to the hacienda frequently, was well-liked by the family, with one exception, and it was believed that he was to become the future husband of the young belle of the valley, for as such Miss Harrington had been repeatedly acknowledged.

The one exception mentioned was the young herder, Hawk Harrington. For some reason, he seemed to bear the suitor of his sister a strong enmity.

A few nights after the raid upon the Oriental Palace by Omaha Oll and his men,

Dean Redwood galloped down to the farmhouse on his favourite charger, a powerful, spirited grey, and dismounting, entered the parlour, where Miss Ella was usually waiting for him on the evenings of his visits.

But she was not in the parlour, to-night, and thinking she had just stepped out for a moment, he seated himself to await her return.

Presently there was an audible footstep, and Hawk Harrington came striding into the room. Redwood instantly arose from his seat upon the sofa, and the gaze of the two men met, unflinchingly. Harrington evidently had not expected to find his enemy there, for he started, then muttered an oath.

"Where is Ella ?" he demanded, gruffly.

"I do not know," Redwood replied, watching the herder narrowly.

"Are you waiting for her ?"

"I am."

"What for ?"

"None of your business, sir. I came to talk with her—not you."

"Oh ! you needn't give us any of your slack !" he growled back, fiercely. "I'm boss of this ranch, and for two bits I'd tumble you out."

"Oh ! *would* you ?" retorted Redwood, as fiercely as his enemy. "Maybe it would be healthy for you to try it. You will find me no saint, I'll warrant you. If you begin the battle, I shall strike to kill !"

Harrington growled some muttered imprecation, and sprang forward, with a long, dangerous-looking knife in his grasp.

The villain meant murder.

But Redwood was not to be cut down without a struggle.

He was, however, somewhat at the mercy of his antagonist, for he was unarmed, while in addition to his knife, Hawk Harrington carried a small arsenal of revolvers in his belt.

But Redwood was on the watch for him as he came rushing forward, and clinching the upraised arm of the ruffian, which grasped the knife, he threw his other arm about the waist, and tripped him to the floor.

Both men went down together, and in the fall Redwood received an ugly cut in the breast from the knife. But in an instant more he had the blade in his possession.

"Now, beg, curse you !" he cried, holding the young herder down as easily as though he had been a baby.

"I will not beg ; nor will I tell you that which you wish to know !" the herder growled, savagely.

"What do you mean! What is there which you know that would benefit me, had I the possession of that knowledge?" Redwood demanded.

"Bah! don't think I'm a fool because I've got you down upon the enemy list, my sharp. Thought no one knew why you came to Del Norte, didn't you? But there's where you made the mistake. We knew of your coming, long ago, and closed up the holes, like ground-mice do in the winter. You may search a lifetime, and you'll not find the place you seek—the headquarters of the Prairie League!"

Redwood started, and a grim expression settled upon his face.

"You are mistaken!" he ventured.

"You lie—I am not mistaken!" Hawk Harrington replied, triumphantly. "You are Dean Redwood, *alias* Cuning Cass Cameron, the ex-Government Spy. Oh! you needn't feign astonishment, nor you needn't attempt to leave Del Norte, for you will be met by a party of gentlemen, who will boost you half-way up to a limb, and hold you there by the aid of a tow-string until a reaction occurs and your spirit flies away."

"Sho! you don't say!"

"You'll find out, if you attempt to sneak out and fetch reinforcements. Stay here in Del Norte, a good, honest, law-abiding citizen, and I'll guarantee you'll be all right!"

"Humph! *you'll* guarantee, you say. Perhaps you are one of the ringleaders of this Prairie League, whose existence it is my purpose to break up. I ought to arrest you!"

"All correct; arrest if you think it will be a healthy undertaking. I'm mighty sure you'd not take me far, ere you'd wish you'd left me here."

"I shall let you go at present!" Cass Cameron said, first disarming his enemy, and then allowing him to rise to his feet. "I have other work to perform, ere I am ready for you—work which I shall push with a will. I only lack a few more points of compass, ere I can put my tools where I want them, and execute my work in triumph."

Then bowing, the ex-Government Spy turned on his heel and quitted the hacienda, leaving Hawk Harrington standing in the centre of the parlour, swearing at the ease with which his enemy had mastered him.

The Government Spy hurried from the yard that encircled the hacienda, and down toward the tree-fringed river, for here he perceived his horse had wandered, in cropping the herbage. He reached the

animal, and was about to vault into the saddle, when the sound of voices reached his ear, and he paused and listened. They were not far away, and in low conversation, yet the ex-Spy recognized one of the speakers as Ella Harrington.

Curiosity and burning jealousy tempted the man to creep forward, and act as an eavesdropper.

He crept upon a bluff near the edge of the water, and looking down beheld the object of his choice sitting side by side, in a boat that rocked upon a sluggish eddy, with a dark-faced man with moustache and imperial, in whose embrace she was closely clasped.

Cameron started violently, and for several moments, could but remain motionless—struck dumb with astonishment.

At last the man released the girl from his embrace, and seizing an oar, whirled the boat back against the shore where it had first rested, previous to being converted into a lover's tryst.

He next assisted the valley belle to the dry ground, and then paused, taking her hand in his.

"Adios, senorita, and may this short interview have given you the same degree of pleasure it has me. Adios!"

Then he turned, as if about to stride away, and—came face to face with Hawk Harrington.

The burly herdsman had stolen up, unperceived, and stood glaring fiercely at the guilty pair, each of his hands gripping a cocked revolver.

"Well?" he interrogated, in a harsh voice, "what is the meaning of this disgraceful midnight meeting? Ella, I am astonished!"

"Oh! Hawk, do not harm him!" entreated the girl, clinging to the arm of her lover. "This is Cyril—Mr. Duane, my—my——"

"Evil genius!" sneered the brother. "Your professed lover no doubt, until he has sufficiently blinded you for his devilish purpose; then it will be different. Whoa! up, thar, my gay Lothario! Don't be in so much of a hurry to take leave."

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" Duane asked, turning back and facing his enemy. "Though I am unarmed, I am neither afraid of you nor any of your style. What do you want?"

"I want ter know what you're doin' out here with my sister, alone, an' ther hour bordering upon midnight?"

"Then, my reply is that it is none of your business!" Duane declared, coolly. "Were you the young lady's father, my answer

would be different ; but you've no business to ask ! ”

“ Hain't I ? Mebbe ye don't know who I am ! I'm Hawk Harrington, and I can shoot. No doubt you can do ditto. In that event I'll lend you one of my revolvers. That's the quickest way to settle a matter of this kind. ”

“ I won't fight ! ” decided the other. “ I have nothing against you, and want not your life. Besides, I am no shot with the revolver, and my life would surely pay the forfeit of so rash a risk ! ”

“ So much the better. Thunder ! ” suddenly ejaculated the herdsman, and he leaped back a pace in astonishment. The bright moonlight falling upon the countenance of the other, for the first made a startling discovery to the herder.

“ *You devil, you're El Gamin !* ”

Duane smiled, oddly.

“ Well, what if I am ? ” he demanded.

“ Duane is my real name—El Gamin a *nom de plume*. ”

“ What became of the real El Gamin, who used to herd it, in this valley ? ”

“ Don't know, I'm sure. ”

“ You are he ! ” positively.

“ Pshaw ! don't be deceived. ”

“ Neither I am. You are El Gamin, the luckiest gambler in Colorado, and a traitor to the League. ”

“ I am not able to make a denial to fit each of those accusations, ” El Gamin replied, coolly.

“ And there is no need that you should. You must fight or I will shoot you in your tracks. The League will give money for your head. ”

“ Why should they ? Though a deserter, they have suffered no betrayal by me. ”

“ You lie ! You it was who first put Cuning Cass Cameron on track. Here ! will you take it ? ”

And the herder extended a choice of his two handsome revolvers.

El Gamin bowed, and accepted the heavier of the pair.

He was averse to shooting when avoidable, but he saw that there was no hope for it now.

But the duel was destined not to take place, for at this juncture, Cass Cameron, the ex-Spy, dashed forward between the two adversaries, with a sharp cry.

“ Hold ! ” he commanded, fiercely. “ No fighting, here. I'll settle this business, if you please. Hawk Harrington, take your faithless sister and return to your hacienda. I'll 'tend to this notorious sharp. ”

Harrington put up his revolver and turned to obey. Strange it was, but the man held

a dread of the ex-Government Spy—was awed into submission in his presence.

When they had disappeared from view, the Spy turned upon—not El Gamin, but nothing !

The card-sharp had as suddenly and mysteriously disappeared as though he had been swallowed up in the earth !

Evidently, he was a coward !

CHAPTER IX

THE MASKED TERROR EQUALS HIS NAME

ON the following day an emigrant train passed through Del Norte. They were bound for Santa Sina, farther up the valley, where they proposed to go into winter quarters, and wait the coming of spring, before continuing their journey. There were but four wagons, and the caravan was evidently rather a poverty-stricken one.

But an hour's halt was made in Del Norte ; then the train continued on.

Three miles out from Del Norte, while the wagons were hidden from view in the hollow of a prairie wave, they were surprised by a band of masked horsemen, who rode down and surrounded them without an instant's notice.

There were fifty of them, at least, mounted upon powerful animals, and armed with polished-barrel repeating rifles ; desperate-looking men, generally, who had roughed it upon the border all their lives.

In advance was the Masked Terror of the valley—Omaha Oll, the young Regulator, both of which he was.

The emigrants were about to defend themselves and open a battle, but the clear voice of Omaha Oll ringing out like a bugle, bade them desist.

“ Hold ! fire not, unless you would seal your own doom ! ” he cried, “ for we mean you no harm. We simply come for the traitor-villain who is trying to escape his doom by going with you. Haul him out and deliver him up, and I'll guarantee you no trouble will be necessary. La Mort—Dresden La Mort, one of the ringleaders of the Prairie League, is the man I want, sir ! ”

“ There is no such man in our caravan, sir ! ” stoutly averred one of the emigrants.

“ Bah ! you cannot deceive me, old man. The fellow is known to be secreted in one of your four wagons. ”

“ In our wagons ? Impossible, sir ! ”

“ Quite possible, old man, although you may not be aware of the fact. Is not the last vehicle, yonder, a store-wagon ? ”

“ It is, though I don't see how you guesse d

it, as all the sides are closed down," was the reply.

"I knew it all the same, however," Omaha Oll assured. "Be kind enough to take a peep into that wagon, and you will no doubt find the man we want—the double-dyed villain and ruffian you are harbouring."

"All right, sir. If there is such a party in our company, unknown, and he is such a villain as you represent, you are welcome to him."

Without a word the settlers left their wagons, and advanced to the rear "schooner," driven by a Texan, and containing mainly the baggage of the caravan, the other wagons carrying the emigrants and their families.

Jabez Hendricks, the supervisor of the little caravan, was a gruff but honest old farmer, and it was not his purpose to shelter a fugitive scoundrel be it even from death. So he headed his companions, and they advanced upon the 'hind wagon, which was driven by the fat Texan, named Sam.

But, ere the covers at the rear or front end of the "schooner" could be raised, there was a succession of sharp pistol reports, and Hendricks and two of his companions fell backward badly wounded.

But this did not deter the other men from doing their duty; they leaped forward, tore aside the canvas coverings, and hauled the stowaway out upon the ground.

Omaha Oll rode forward, a triumphant laugh breaking from his masked lips.

"Ha! ha! didn't I tell you? There is the outlaw of half a score of brutal border outrages, gentlemen!" he said. "Dresden La Mort is his name, and a worse character is hard to find. Knights of Vengeance, you see the vile wretch who has struck each of you a blow or more through the agency of the Prairie League. Take him and do your duty."

The Avengers rode forward and dismounted, a number of them seizing the unlucky La Mort, and securely binding him. Then he was borne off to a lone prairie tree, but a few yards distant, and preparations were made for his final launching into eternity.

Night upon the prairies of San Luis valley, through which creep the wandering waters of Rio Grande Del Norte.

Night, in December, with the warmth of late spring—with the soft balmy breezes and sounds of nature peculiar to the time—to the hour. Birds of night are in the air, and send up their weird noises; two persons are out upon the prairie, enveloped in the

gloom, engaged in unguarded conversation.

One a man, tall and brawny and evil of face and feature, roughly dressed, and armed to the teeth, with belt weapons and rifle.

The other was a woman, attired in a trailing white wrapper, while over her head was a filmy mass of silken lace-work. She was very beautiful, both in face and form, and stood close to the man, one arm resting lovingly over the bowed head of a superb white stallion and the remaining hand grasping a rifle.

The woman was speaking.

"You have the messages now, so take your departure and bear them to your chief."

"Very well, my lady; I will obey your orders at once. Is there any other word to bear our chief?"

"None, Pedrillo; give him the dispatch, and tell him that Prairie Patrol sent you."

The man bowed humbly. Then he turned upon his heel and stalked away into the gloom. Prairie Patrol then sprang into the saddle, and dashed off upon her horse in a different direction.

Pedrillo the courier of the Prairie League started off upon his return to the stronghold, without suspecting that he was observed.

But such, however, was the case. Not a dozen yards from the spot where occurred the interview between the Prairie Patrol and the messenger, was crouching in the deep grass that grew in a damp buffalo-bed, a horse and a man. Both lay perfectly quiet during the conversation of the twain, the man eagerly listening to catch every word. Then when Pedrillo and Lestie separated and started off in different directions, the man rose cautiously to his feet, and bade his sagacious animal do likewise.

"Now, Clipper, we are upon the scent!" the spy muttered, patting the black upon his arching neck, and then vaulting into the saddle. "We have but to follow the messenger to find what's up."

The speaker was the Masked Terror! Like a phantom of the night he had stolen up and overheard the conversation of the female Patrol and the messenger, which was of a nature to lead him to suppose that something of importance was on the tapis, which concerned the Prairie League.

Accordingly, with no thought of fear, the young Regulator set off in pursuit of the messenger—not in hot pursuit, but in a creeping, stealthy pursuit, his steed moving along with the carefulness of a cat.

"On, Clipper, old boy! Hug him close, but don't give him warning of your coming." But Pedrillo was wide awake, and the

flash of a pistol and the singing of a bullet warned Omaha Oll that he had been discovered. But in that flash he had caught a glimpse of the messenger's form only a few yards ahead, and quickly drawing his revolver, he discharged three barrels in rapid succession.

The result was more than expected.

There was a great yell of pain, and the sound of a heavy body falling to the ground; then, on riding on, the Regulator found his victim outstretched in the grass.

He dismounted and bent over the man, and found that he was dead.

A short search discovered the papers Pedrillo had received from Prairie Patrol. One of them read as follows:

"CHIEF OF PRAIRIE LEAGUE:—Large miners' train from the Rockies will come down the valley to-morrow night. Big amount of gold in their possession so you'd best lay for it. LESTIE."

Leaving the messenger lying where he had fallen, Omaha Oll sprang upon Clipper's back, and dashed away.

CHAPTER X

FIGHTING RUFFIANS

OMAHA OLL, as the reader may already have guessed, was no less a person than the ex-road-agent, Deadwood Dick, whom we left by the side of the dying Annihilator.

We ended his acquaintance there rather abruptly. Let us go back for a moment, and review his past since then.

Leaving Old Avalanche lying, as he supposed, stark and stiff in death, the Prince of the Road turned toward the ruins of his home, to procure some sharp instrument with which to dig a grave, for he would not leave the spot without giving the old scout a decent burial.

On his way he came upon the lifeless body of his infant son, and standing there and gazing upon the beautiful child he had so idolized, next to his darling Leone, he raised his clinched right hand toward the firelit sky, and registered an oath of vengeance before God—an oath to avenge his triple loss, though the consummation of that vengeance absorbed the remainder of his natural life.

He went back then and laid the babe beside the scout, after which he retraced his steps toward the ruined hacienda, in search of a shovel or spade, with which to dig a grave.

After wandering about for half an hour, in the black track left by the fire, he found the implements required, and hastened back upon the prairie to perform his last ghastly labour for the dead.

But great was his astonishment on arriving at the spot where he had left the bodies, to find that they had both strangely disappeared!

At last when morning was near at hand, he turned his back upon the ruined hacienda, and strode away.

For twenty-eight hours, he prowled about in the vicinity of Del Norte, without food or rest.

Then he fell in with a band of valley settlers, who, under the title of "Avengers" and "Regulators," were organizing for a campaign against the "Prairie League," and they had chosen him their leader, well knowing of his dauntlessness from report.

Thus, under the name of Omaha Oll, and in deep disguise, the former road-agent of Black Hill notoriety, had become a Regulator.

We left Omaha Oll dashing away across the prairie, after obtaining the dispatches from the outlaw messenger, Pedrillo.

He rode swiftly on through the moonlit night.

Suddenly a wild piercing cry welled up piteously upon the night—a woman's scream, fraught with keenest terror and indignation.

It reached the ears of Omaha Oll, and in an instant he was all attention. His head was bent forward, and his piercing gaze swept the moonlit prairies.

Then about a mile away, he caught an indistinct view of a flying horse and rider, but was not able to identify the same.

"It's a woman in trouble at least!" he muttered, gathering the reins tighter, and throwing his feet out of the stirrups. "Now Clipper, away, and let it not be said that you or your master hesitated to strike in the defence of a woman. Away!"

And off at the Masked Terror's command bounded the black charger.

On—on; it took but a few moments to prove that they were gaining, although the fugitive's horse was one of no ordinary speed and endurance. And a dark scowl was upon the face of the fugitive, as he noted how rapidly his pursuer was gaining.

"Curse the luck!" he growled, gazing alternately toward the on-coming Masked Terror, and into the fair white face of the captive he carried in his arms, "that fellow is bound to overhaul me, and give me trouble."

Closer—closer they grew—both men could see each other distinctly now; both were somewhat amazed, for the resemblance between them was startling. Deadwood Dick's cast of countenance was given each, and in form they were not unlike. Omaha Oll instantly made up his mind as to the identity of the fugitive. It was the El Gamin, at whom the Prairie League had struck, when they killed Avalanche, Leone, and the babe, and destroyed his pretty home upon the banks of the Rio Grande Del Norte.

El Gamin, the great Gambler Prince.

On—on—nearer, until Clipper's nose was brushed by the tail of the fugitive's horse—then Omaha Oll spoke.

"Hold! Why continue this race, Sir Gambler?"

"What do you want?" El Gamin demanded, turning in his saddle, fiercely.

"Why have you dogged me in this way?"

"Because a woman's scream appealed to my manly nature, and called me to the rescue!" Omaha Oll replied, proudly. "You seem to be a kidnapper as well as a gambler, according to this bundle"; and the young Chief of the Regulators laid his hand upon the bundle El Gamin carried, for he was now close enough to enable him to do so. "I demand an explanation!"

"By what right, pray?"

"In the name of the 'Regulators and Avengers,' Sir Gambler. I am Omaha Oll, the Masked Terror; or, Deadwood Dick, the reformed ex-road-agent, as you like!"

El Gamin uttered an exclamation of surprise, and drew rein abruptly.

"You Deadwood Dick!" he repeated, in astonishment; "you the Black Hills road-agent?"

"I was; yes!"

"Then you are my enemy."

"I presume so!" with that old peculiar laugh. "I am 'most every one's enemy, that finds it convenient to make me so."

"You killed my brother, Fred Audley; I shall undertake to avenge him!" El Gamin said, bitterly.

"Ah!" Omaha Oll started. "You were his brother, eh? Fred Audley was a traitor!"

"A traitor! Bah! he was not more of a traitor than you. You are a traitor to your country and to your fellow-men, and deserve nothing more than a good stout limb with a rope and your neck attached to it!"

"Ah! do you really think so? We won't dispute about that, for no matter what my past has been, my present I am faithfully trying to improve. You say you

are my enemy. What do you propose to do that you may work off the strength of your towering passion?"

"We will fight if you *dare*," replied El Gamin.

"Shall I assist your charge to the ground, Sir Gambler?" said Omaha Oll, vaulting from the saddle.

"You may lay her upon the grass until we settle this matter!" El Gamin assented, yielding up his captive, who was bound hand and foot. "We will fight in the saddle!"

"As well that way as any other!" Omaha Oll replied, laying the girl upon the grass, and with lightning celerity severing her bonds. "Now, miss," in an undertone, "when we get to fighting briskly, you creep away, at a safe distance, and then put for home, wherever that is."

"I have no home. I am alone in this strange country—all alone!" was the whispered reply.

A sharp exclamation from El Gamin at this juncture called the Regulator's attention.

"Look! look!" the gambler exclaimed, excitedly, pointing up the valley, which was flooded with moonlight.

"We are between enemies all around. Yonder come the Prairie League outlaws; we have the choice of racing fifteen straight miles for shelter, or fighting. Which shall it be? We cannot afford to be enemies now; we must join our forces!"

"As you like. I bear you no ill-will, except for abducting this maiden. No! we'll not run. Dismount, and make your animal lie down. We can easily defend ourselves, I think, for I see you carry a Remington repeating rifle, and my Evans, here, is good for thirty-four shots."

El Gamin accordingly dismounted, and at a word his horse as well as that of Omaha Oll, lay outstretched upon the ground; then the two men crouched behind their respective barricades and awaited the attack of the ruffian herders and outlaws who composed the Prairie League.

Oll had taken care to draw the young maiden to his shelter.

A glance at her; then the young Regulator turned his attention to the danger that was coming up in front.

Of the horsemen there were at least thirty, all armed with rifles, who carried "arms," as they rode.

Ahead of them, barking and quarrelling among themselves, were a pack of Texan cattle-dogs, and Omaha Oll uttered an exclamation fraught with doubt, as he beheld them.

He knew them to be savage and stubborn in battle—knew they were more to be feared than the human wolves behind them.

"What is it?" El Gamin asked, laying his revolvers before him, and grasping his repeating rifle, firmly. "You think we——"

"Will have business to attend to, if we want to get out of this alive!" Omaha Oll replied, grimly. "There are twelve dogs that must die first, and then nearly three times that number of outlaws to follow. Get ready! One, two, three!"

Then the two defenders' rifles rang out spitefully, and though the distance was against them, two of the dogs went down.

But, still, with wild exultant yells the outlaws came rushing on. Now, they were but five hundred yards away!

CHAPTER XI

FIGHTING BRUTES

ON—on they came like a charging army, their exulting yells making strange echoes resound over the rolling expanse of prairie, upon which the old moon threw a pale, sickly radiance.

"Ready! Fire again! We must not lose a moment, or we are dead men, and subject to a horrible fate, ten times worse than ordinary death!" the young Regulator cried, again bringing his rifle to bear. "See! they are drawing rein and setting on the dogs to do the work of destruction, while they look on and laugh. Ready, comrade. One! two! make your bullets count, and send them in quick succession! three and fire!"

It was indeed as Oll had said.

The outlaws had drawn rein just out of close rifle-shot, and while they sat in their saddles, were setting on the savage cattle-dogs.

And the brutes knew just what was expected of them, apparently, for they came on, howling and barking, and quarrelling over which was to be in at the death first.

At Omaha's word "fire," both his gun and that of El Gamin rang forth, sharply, and unerring were the bullets, for two of the remaining ten dogs went to the ground, lifeless; yet on came the rest nearer and nearer at every leap—in two minutes they would be at hand, savage and ferocious, thirsting for human blood.

One monster brute in the lead seemed to be the commander of the gang, and he was apparently impregnable; for six times did

Omaha Oll fire at him, in quick succession, but without effect. On the fierce brute came, his eyes gleaming, and froth dripping from his distended jaws.

"By heaven, comrade, bullets are wasted on that beast!" the young Chief of Regulators cried, desperately. "We must pick off the remaining ones."

Crack! crack! rang both rifles and pistols, and echo after echo rang over the prairie with weird result. And when the last bullets of the two men were spent, there were yet three of the angered brutes to contend with—three, and they were not thirty yards away. With brutes' perseverance, they were bound not to give up till the last.

"Quick! your knife! It is our last resort!" Omaha Oll cried, drawing his own trusty blade, and bracing back preparatory against the onslaught. "Stand on your guard, and strike as you value life!"

El Gamin nodded. He, too, was on the guard, with his hunting-knife clinched between his teeth, and his hands free to clutch the enemy on approach.

On they came, side by side—the big leader, and two well matching him in size and strength. Three or four more leaps, and they would be upon the defenders.

A great yell of triumph arose from the throats of the outlaws, and they lashed their horses nearer, that they might watch the death-struggles.

"Ready, El Gamin?" Omaha asked, without turning his head.

"Ready!" El Gamin had just time to say; then came the onslaught.

With roars not unlike those of an infant lion, the three dogs leaped upon the horses as they lay prostrate, and then upon El Gamin and the young Regulator.

The largest one singled out Omaha, while his two companions attacked the gambler. But one soon withdrew, and putting his nose to the prairie, sprang away with a series of howls fearful to hear. He had struck upon the trail of Emily, the gambler's captive, who, becoming terrified, had crept away unnoticed by the two men.

"God help her!" Oll muttered, as, at a glance, he comprehended how matters stood.

He turned and hurled off the savage brute from him with all his force, but on it came again, with eyes blazing and jaws distended.

Braced back and watchful, the Masked Terror received him, and deep his knife sank into the back of the monster's neck. With almost a human shriek, the dog fell back, and bled out his life upon the moonlit plain. Omaha Oll then darted a glance at

the gambler, and perceived that the dog was getting the worst of it.

"El Gamin is all right; ha! the other dog has found the girl. I must off to her rescue!"

And the next moment Omaha Oll had sprung upon his horse, the animal was upon its feet, and they were dashing away like the wind over the prairies.

So quick had been his action that he was some distance away ere the outlaws had sufficiently comprehended to start in pursuit.

"On, Clipper—on like the lightning flash!" cried Omaha, as he again heard piteous cries ahead of him, in which direction the girl had gone. "The brute will tear her to pieces ere I can reach her!"

The captive had run nearly a mile from the battleground, and by the time the young Regulator had reached her side, the ferocious cattle-dog had torn her so nearly up that life had become extinct.

And the dog not content with the havoc wrought, left the mangled corpse, and sprang fiercely at the throat of the Regulator's horse. But that sagacious animal had had its early training, and received it thoroughly too, and craning forward its handsome neck, caught the yelping bloodhound by the back of the neck with its strong, white teeth.

With a chuckle, Omaha Oll came to Clipper's assistance, and dispatched the ferocious brute and hurled it to the ground.

Then he glanced around him for the first time since his flight. The outlaws had divided into two parties; one of these was coming hotly on in pursuit of himself, and the other was after El Gamin, who had gotten rid of his canine foe, mounted his horse, and was scouring away southward.

Those in pursuit of Omaha Oll were now within gunshot, and he saw that they meant to bring him down, dead or alive. This resolved him as to his course.

With a last shuddering glance at the corpse of the girl, he headed Clipper northwest, toward Del Norte, and "tucked" on the spurs.

But soon a new calamity came.

There were loud rifle-reports in his rear, and a bullet struck noble Clipper in the flank, ploughing a deep wound. Instantly the poor animal began to go lame, and Omaha Oll saw with regret, that he must depend upon something else than horse-flesh to extricate him from the pursuing danger.

Patting the limping horse kindly, he spurred him faster; then dropped off in the grass, and crept rapidly out of the track of the approaching horsemen.

But his action had been observed by the sharp-eyed members of the League, as was evidenced by a chorus of triumphant yells, and peering carefully above and over the tops of the tall wiry grass, he perceived that they were spreading out and surrounding him.

"Ha! curse them; they are bound to haul me in if possible. Confound it, why didn't I think of this before? I believe the sound will carry!"

Lying upon his back in the grass he hastily detached from his belt a small silver bugle.

Placing the tube to his lips, he blew a sharp, long-echoing blast, that rang far and wide over the plain.

In consternation the outlaws stopped and listened to the quavering reverberations, while their leader swept the surrounding country with his powerful field-glass.

Soon he uttered a whoop of defiance, for away to the east he beheld a large band of Regulators loom up over the crest of a prairie billow, which was brightly bathed in yellow moonlight, and coming swooping down to the assistance of their leader.

Then like whipped curs the outlaws wheeled their horses and fled, for the Regulators greatly outnumbered them, and these brethren of the League had no desire to test the prowess of the followers of Omaha Oll.

Seeing his enemies retreating, Omaha arose to his feet, and sent a mocking yell after them; then turned and waited for his own men to come up, which they soon did, bringing wounded Clipper with them.

Careful examination was made, to which the noble animal patiently submitted, and Omaha was overjoyed to learn that his favourite steed was not seriously injured. Indeed, the animal seemed greatly relieved when the bullet was extracted, and once more ready for business.

"We heard you call, captain," said Fawdon, the lieutenant in command, "and made haste this way; for we felt you were not the one to summon assistance unless it was absolutely necessary."

"You were abroad, then, lieutenant?"

"Yes. Went over to Del Norte, but found all quiet there. Not much attraction at the Palace to-night!"

"Probably not. The Del Norteans are lying low, in waiting for the fat miners' train that comes into the valley to-morrow. And, my hearties, it must be our duty to see that train safely through to Del Norte, for between here and there lies danger for them, that has death in it."

"Halt!"

Clear and stern the challenge of the sentry rang out, and ominous rifle-clicks were there to back the command.

It looked as if the little band of masked horsemen who had stopped at the edge of a little glade in the heart of a prairie motte, were not too welcome comers, at the darkest hour of the night before day-dawn.

Beyond whence came the sentry's challenge, in the lovely little hemlock fringed glade, a dozen wagons were corralled, and here and there were camp-fires burning low, and casting a faint flickering light upon the scene.

"Halt!" Clear and decisive the warning rang out, and the horsemen who were following the lead of the Masked Terror drew instant rein.

"Halt it is!" Omaha Oll returned grimly. "What'll you have?"

"We'll have you and your road-agents keep a proper distance, Mr. Deadwood Dick!" was the retort. "You can't play Black Hills games down here!"

The ex-road-agent leader of the Del Norte Regulators uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Who are you that knows aught of Deadwood Dick?" he demanded, after a moment's reflection.

"My name is Dore. Guess you do not know me; nevertheless I was in Deadwood during your notorious reign, and recognized you by your voice the moment you spoke. So, Sir Road-agent, you may as well go elsewhere for plunder, for you cannot have ours."

"Nor do we want it, Sir Sentry. You mistake our calling. I am Omaha Oll, and these are my men—two-score in count. We are not road-agents, but Regulators, and having warning of your coming, we have come to offer you our services as protectors against the Prairie League, a band of merciless ruffian herders, who will attack you before you make Del Norte. Accept of us, fearlessly, and we promise you our assistance, for at the time we help you we are also furthering our own mission, by breaking up this infamous league of ruffian herders."

For several moments there was no reply.

Then the sentry again spoke.

"We accept of your story, sir; but are you not in truth Deadwood Dick?"

"I was in the Black Hills; here, I am Omaha Oll, the Masked Terror and Regulator."

Then ride forward, sir, and we will trust you, for I never heard of Deadwood Dick

going back upon his pledge or promise. Come into camp, and you will be welcome!" the sentry replied.

CHAPTER XII

TWO ECCENTRICS IN A FIX

"GOL darn ye!"

"Consarn yer sugar-coated mug!"

"I'll baste ye over ther mouth ef I ever git loose!"

"An' ef I ever find out thet ye hit me, why, by ther immort'l bone that grew fast in ther larnix uv old Joner, I'll trans-mogyfy ye inter a petrified clam."

The above conversation occurred between two men, who, out in mid-prairie, several miles from Del Norte, were rolling about upon the grass, in close proximity to each other, and both of them securely bound, hand and foot.

One was that long, lanky, seven-foot, mysterious individual whom we noticed in the first part of this story, as the Arkansas Toothpick.

The other unfortunate was literally the dead returned to life, for no less a personage was he than the old Annihilator, whom many of the readers have doubtless supposed to be dead. Yes, Old Avalanche alive, but though exceedingly lively and himself again, he was not well of his wounds, received on that terrible night when the Harris home had fallen prey to the prairie flames.

How the old man escaped, shall be known anon.

And these two odd sheep of the flock had no apparent love for each other, judging from the above conversation, given as they lay facing each other.

Night was coming on, and when darkness set in, they were in imminent danger from the prowling wolves.

The way they had come in this unrelishable position is easily explained.

Both were out upon the prairie, in companionship, when they had encountered a strolling band of Navajo Indians, who were abroad in search of sport and game.

They approached the two scouts, and in an unexpected moment took them prisoners, and after binding them left them on the grass and went their way, rejoicing over their "much big" joke.

The Toothpick avowed that it was the fact of Avalanche's having no ears that had caused the joke; and the Annihilator was positive that the Navajoes had taken offence at them, because of the Arkansas

man's ill proportions; from which word passed to word, until the twain were in reality mad and belligerent.

The question of how they were ever to get free, now, was not one of plain solution. Certain it was that neither of the prisoners had strength sufficient to burst their bonds, which left it impossible to escape, until they had some assistance.

Presently, wafted on the wings of the evening breeze, came a strange sound—not the lowing of a cow, the bleat of a sheep, nor the cry of a human, but the peculiar "ba-a-a" of a goat. Yes, there could be no mistake about this, and it caused Avalanche to struggle quickly up to a sitting posture.

"Hooray! Great carnivorous ham-bone that assaulted ther Adam's apple ov old Joner!" he cried, triumphantly. "Et aire my right bower, Florence Night-in-a-gale, a-comin' ter my resky. Hayr, Florence! Cum quick, ye dasted ornery beast an' extricate yer master frum a consarned diffikilty."

And Florence was soon forthcoming, but not alone, for the eccentric and wonderfully educated animal was dogging at the heels of a man, who, at a first glance, Avalanche could have sworn was Deadwood Dick.

But instead of Dick, it was El Gamin, the Gambler Prince.

"Hello! what's the matter here? You fellows appear in somewhat of a dilemma!" he exclaimed, coming forward, while Florence sprang joyfully to her old master's side, and whisked her stubby tail in manifestation of her unprecedented pleasure. "Ha! by heaven! you, Jem Murray?"

"At yer sarvice!" the Toothpick said. "Jem Murray, Sheriff of Golden City, an' ther original Arkansas Toothpick."

A dark scowl covered El Gamin's face.

"So you have followed me, eh?" he muttered. "Well, I expected nothing else, under the circumstances. What do you want?"

"My daughter, and your life!" Murray answered, fiercely. "Whar's the gal first?"

El Gamin threw himself upon the grass, and for several moments stared hard at the ground.

"The poor child is dead!" he replied, at last, brushing a tear from his eye, at the approach of some painful memory. "She died a month after we left Golden City, of her old complaint, heart-disease, and I saw that she had a proper interment."

The lanky sheriff groaned aloud.

"I expected thet w'en I couldn't heer o' her bein' along wi' yer!" he said, bitterly.

"Durn ye, ef I ever git my claws onter yer weasand, ye'll think et's time ye squar'd accounts on yearth."

"You shouldn't blame me, so much, as I was not all to blame!" the gambler replied. "You refused to sanction our marriage and happiness, and so we had to elope and take our chances. Had Blossom lived, we should ever have been happy together."

Murray softened a little at this.

"Mebbe you wasn't all cross-ways," he allowed, thoughtfully, "but, bein's I've chased ye so fur, I ken't let you alone wi'out fightin' on thet score. 'Twon't take long ter tell which is the best feller, an' that'll end it."

"We won't fight now!" El Gamin replied, hastily. "I have other work to do; and, by the way, it was only by this eccentric goat that I was attracted here. So I'll bid you good-evenin'."

And the gambler was about to turn away. But Avalanche made haste to call him back, for game yet was the veteran scout.

"I say you chap, don't get inter such a persperation ter depart. Et has a bad reflection on yer phyzzical constitoochin, generally; asides, et's dangerous. Needn't mind about ther baby elerphant, hyar, wi' honey-lipped sugar refinery. He ain't no good on earth."

"Then ye ain't pards, eh?"

"Nary a time!" quickly objected the "original" Arkansas Toothpick, with a sniff of disdain. "Ye don't s'pose I'd 'sociate wi' sich a humbly, or'nery pigmy, do ye? I'd die sooner!"

El Gamin turned without a word and severed Avalanche's bonds; then strode rapidly away into the gloom that had densely thickened over the prairie. Whither he was bound was a secret to himself.

Avalanche arose to his feet with a triumphant chuckle, and approaching, bent over the reclining Toothpick, a broad grin upon his features.

"Good-bye, my honey lip—my gorgeous blooming peony—my fizzic an' sugar-coated pill, good-bye. I hate ter leave yer, very much, as ther leaf sed ter ther tree, in autumn; but ther best o' friends must part. Hope yer won't cotch ther distemper, layin' here, or that ther wolves won't git ye!"

And whistling to his goat, the eccentric Annihilator turned on his heel, and strode away over the prairie in the direction where lay Del Norte's twinkling lights.

He limped considerably yet from his wounds, and therefore his progress was necessarily somewhat slow.

Not ten minutes after the Annihilator had gone, Jem Murray coolly burst apart his bonds, and springing to his feet, hurried swiftly away.

CHAPTER XIII

TRUCE AND DEFIANCE

THE sentry led the way forward into the glade, shouting for those in camp to awake, as he did so, and behind him Omaha Oll and his men followed on horseback.

And a wild-looking set of fellows they were, too, with their picturesque herder habits, slouch hats, and black masks, and the sleepy-headed miners regarded them with suspicion, until the man Dore assured them that all was right, and safe.

The men rekindled the camp-fires, and began to show a hospitable disposition by setting forth food and drink.

While the miners were preparing food for them, Omaha and his men betook themselves to one side, and stretched themselves out for an hour's sleep of which all were in sore need. At the end of that time, they were awakened, and summoned to the repast, which, though humble, was most refreshingly tempting.

After the meal had been dispatched, Boss Breck, the commander in charge of the caravan, made his appearance, and was introduced to the Regulators and Omaha, their youthful commander.

Early the next morning a messenger came to inform Omaha that the caravan was ready to move.

He accordingly accompanied the messenger back to camp.

Captain Breck had arranged everything preparatory for a start. Instead of riding in the wagons as they had done heretofore, the women were mounted upon the Regulators' horses, while Omaha and his men were to conceal themselves inside the schooners, where they were to remain until the attack of the Prairie League, when they could open up their concealed battery, with disastrous effect upon the foe.

Accordingly, with assignments to positions, the caravan left the motte and toiled along slowly over the prairie, toward its next destination. Del Norte lay some twenty-five miles in the distance, yet Breck had strong hopes of being able to push into the town by ten o'clock that evening.

As he expected no encounter with the ruffians until noon, or thereabouts, Omaha Oll did not confine himself or men wholly to the wagons, but they all took exercise in the open air.

Omaha rode ahead with Captain Breck.

"Ha! are not those our enemies, now?" asked Breck.

The miner pointed to where the head of horse and horseman were just disappearing from view behind a prairie swell, some two miles ahead.

"It is either the whole band there behind the hill, or else a spy posted to give warning of the coming of the train," Omaha replied, bringing his glass to bear, but without effect. "I will soon ascertain, however, for there to our right is a swell much higher than any other within the scope of two miles, and from there I can see, and signal you to proceed in the event of danger."

So saying, the handsome young Regulator wheeled his horse and galloped back to the rear of the train; standing ready for instant duty were the miners, at the word of warning.

"Keep your weapons out of view, but have them where you can grab them in an instant, boys!" was the encouraging cry of the Masked Terror, for masked was the young avenger, and a grim-looking rider, whom no one could relish to meet as a foe.

Then, with a word of warning to his own men, he galloped swiftly away over the prairie toward the billow he had indicated to Captain Breck, which was the highest point in that vicinity for observation.

Eagerly those from the train watched the dashing, graceful equestrian, until he reached the summit; then all held their breath in suspense while he swept the eastward landscape with his clear eagle-eye.

They saw him look long and earnestly; then, as if by magic, both horse and rider became prostrated upon the ground, and were seen to be crawling off the summit.

"It means danger, fellers!" cried Boss Breck, wheeling and riding back along the train. "Stand ready ter execute my orders at er minnit's notice!"

Omaha and his sagacious and well-trained animal soon crawled entirely off the summit, and Omaha then rose to his feet and ran around in a circle; then pointed toward the halted caravan, which looked odd and picturesque, away down in the valley. The next minute he had ordered Clipper up, was upon his back, and dashing down the slope.

"Thet move tells us ter corral our wagons, an' prepare fer battle!" cried Breck, as he watched the young Regulator, anxiously.

It was but the work of a few moments to swing the long white-covered schooners into a circle, and unhitch the draught-

horses and mules and put them inside the circle. Within the space the miners and their families were also taking refuge, when Omaha dashed up, his horse panting and flecked with foam, while he himself was pretty well blown.

"Good! It is lucky you comprehended my meaning, for the band of the Prairie League are so largely our superior in numbers that it would be rash to attempt to ride through their midst. Ha! get ready, for there they come, now!"

He pointed to the eastward, where a large band of armed horsemen were just coming into view over a prairie crest. There were at least three-score and a half of them.

"We've got work before us, I tell you!" Omaha declared, jumping Clipper over into the corral, and then proceeding from one wagon to another to give his men courage.

Then Omaha leaped over into the corral, where the miners and their families and the horses were all crowded in. Breck stood with rifle in hand watching the approaching ruffian band anxiously.

"You are too crowded in here!" Oll cried, taking in the situation at a glance. "Here!" and he raised up a wagon-tongue—"drive out my horses, and let them shift for themselves; I'll risk their going far!"

The Regulators' animals were accordingly all driven out, and the gap reclosed. This left more fighting room within the inclosure, and made it better altogether.

In the meantime the outlaws were seen to be coming madly on at the best speed of their wiry mustangs, and in their lead rode the *eloire* man of Del Norte, Bill Monte, and the mysterious Prairie Patrol, whose connection with the outlaws made her a repulsive object, even though she was beautiful in face and form.

Just out of gunshot the outlaw-herders came to a halt, while Wild Bill and Prairie Patrol rode forward, with white rags held aloft on the muzzles of their rifles for a truce.

"Shall we let them approach?" asked Boss Breck, turning to the Masked Terror.

"Not close enough to learn anything!" Oll replied, leaping upon Clipper's back.

"I'll go out and hear their say."

And laying his trusty Evans's rifle across his saddle-bow, the daring ex-road-agent rode fearlessly forth upon the prairie unaccompanied, and evidently careless as to the consequences.

He hastened his horse, however, for he cared not to have the two truce-bearers

approach near enough to discover the slitted canvas sides of the "schooners," lest they suspect the presence of a concealed battery.

Wild Bill nodded, and drew rein as Omaha approached, then spoke

"Are you in charge of yonder train, young feller?" he demanded gruffly.

"At present I am. Why do you ask, Sir Gambler and Robber?" the Masked Terror answered.

"Because I wanted ter see the gineral in command," the outlaw said, with a chuckle, as he thought, no doubt, of the easy victory in store for him.

"We're the Prairie League o' ther San Luis valley, as ye've doubtless heerd of, an' we demand an unconditional surrender of yer train as toll fer passage over our exclusive route."

"Humph! is *this* all you come out here to say?" sneered Omaha, in contempt. "If it is, you may as well paddle right along back, for we'll not surrender no more'n we'll cut our heads off," and the Regulator wheeled his animal and galloped back toward camp.

Monte cursed furiously, and he and Prairie Patrol rode back to the outlaw's lines, where a short consultation was held. Evidently they were a little suspicious; but soon it was apparent that their greed for gold had overmastered their fears, for with loud cries they spurred their horses on to do the opening charge.

A battle was now a certainty!

CHAPTER XIV

LURKING DANGER

ON came the enemy at full tilt, presenting rather an imposing aspect.

Omaha Oll had resumed his position within the corral, and stood among the miners, cheering them with words and example. Nearer and nearer came the ruffian herders, until they were within easy gunshot; then, at a blare from Omaha's silver trumpet, the miners, twelve in number, opened up with a deadly volley that emptied as many saddles as shots were fired.

But, evidently such a defence the outlaws had apprehended, for they renewed their cries of triumph, and urged their mustangs harder, while they poured in a rattling volley upon the train. This did more harm to the Regulators in the wagons, than to the miners behind them, for several of the former were wounded more or less severely.

But enough out of their two-score was left to retaliate with a deadly fusilade, which, to the utter consternation of the herders, swept full half of their front men away, and utter confusion reigned.

Among those who fell was Wild Bill Monte, and seeing him go down, Prairie Patrol quickly galloped to the front, and in Spanish rallied the men about her, and they came on with drawn revolvers. Seeing which Omaha gave the ringing order:

"Revolvers all! Courage, comrades; there are only thirty more!"

Revolvers were drawn, and the moment range was gained, a volley from either side tore like electric hail through the air, doing some damage to the miners, and emptying several more of the outlaws' saddles.

Seeing which they whirled about and beat a precipitate retreat, for the distance of half a mile, when they halted and dismounted, evidently for a rest.

"Very well done!" commented Omaha, as Captain Breck advanced with beaming face and extended hand.

"I apprehended more loss on our side. How many are wounded of our party, lieutenant?" addressing the Regulator, who had just completed an examination of the wagons.

"Only two seriously, and six slightly, captain," was the reply. "None of the lot are unable to ride!"

"Good! then we'll take leave of the train, presently, if yonder roughs clear out, which I believe is their intention."

"I find that our loss has not been as severe as yours," said Breck. "Altogether, it has been what I call a lucky termination of a battle against odds. You don't think they'll attack us again, then, young man?"

"I can better answer that question after awhile!" Omaha replied, grimly. "Hitch up your horses and get the train in motion. Lieutenant, you may catch our horses, and we will ride on to Del Norte with the train. I think we have little to fear from yon human coyotes, 'twixt here and there!"

Accordingly the miners set to work and geared the draught horses to the wagons, Omaha Oll's horses were caught, and in half an hour the caravan was again toiling away over the dun prairie.

At a safe distance the League, in its depletion of numbers, followed. Perhaps a score of the disabled outlaws had been remounted, and sent off southward by east, to their stronghold.

Wild Bill Monte was with the party who

were following the train, he and Prairie Patrol riding in advance.

The ruffian had been only slightly stunned by the bullet, and was now among the fiercest of those who pursued the miners' caravan, their object being to obtain booty and revenge.

Omaha Oll and a division of his Regulators rode in advance of the train, while another division brought up the rear. And thus, making a peculiarly picturesque spectacle, they all moved along through the cold December's afternoon sunlight.

As he wished to make Del Norte before camping for the night, Captain Breck had the train push steadily on and as rapidly as the nature of the route would admit.

At sunset Del Norte lay in sight, in the distance, but it was yet nine or ten miles away, and there were no roads on which the wagons could be drawn rapidly, which made it promise to be well toward midnight ere they reached the town.

Leaving affairs at the train in charge of his lieutenant, Omaha Oll started on ahead at a sharp gallop. It was his purpose to visit Del Norte, and see how the land lay, then ride back and report.

On—on, he galloped, and at last entered Del Norte, unmasked, for thus he was not recognized as Omaha Oll, the Masked Terror.

First of all he went to the gambling den known as the Oriental Palace. Here he found a strange desertion, only a few of the habitués being present, and these were strolling idly about. No playing was going on, and the place had a deserted and uninviting appearance.

To avoid suspicion, the young Regulator sauntered through the great apartment; and finally he invited the gamekeeper to start up the keno game, which was done with alacrity, for business had never been more slack.

Accordingly, several bouts were played, Omaha, with his habitual luck, winning every time. Then, when tired of the sport, he arose and sauntered out of the building, a perplexed expression upon his face.

"I am puzzled," he muttered, when he was alone. "Confound it, I wish I knew what to do."

Springing into the saddle, he galloped to the western side of the town, looking off toward the caravan. It was now out of sight, probably hidden in the depth of a prairie wave.

"I see no other way than to let them come up. Better to fight it out here in town than to take the chances of an open prairie attack, in Stygian darkness"; for

the sky was now overcast with sombre clouds, and the night promised to be one of intense blackness. "I wish I had the counsel of Old Avalanche, just about now. His old head had an overstock of ingenuity in it, and I think he could see the way through."

"Great ham-bone thet exorcised ther hog-goblin' uv old Joner! Moses who became famuss fer his bull-rushin' proclivities!" exclaimed a familiar voice, close at hand; "ef all ye want aire Avalanche—ther great devastatin' disease o' ther peraries—why heer is thet awesum ruffle uv a hurricane, an' j'int, and all."

And from the bushes, close at hand, emerged the veteran Annihilator, sure enough! followed by his eccentric companion, the goat. Omaha Oll started, violently, and his face assumed an incredulous expression as he beheld the old scout.

"You! Avalanche!" he exclaimed—"you, alive? I thought you dead."

"Yas, I calkylate so; but all ther same—ther old contagious eppydemic ain't gone over the dam, yet. Ham-bone that sanctified Joner, *no!*"

"But how, in the name of all that is wonderful, does it come that you *are* alive?" Omaha demanded, with increasing amazement. "When I left you, to go in search of tools with which to dig your grave, I believed you gone—quite dead. When I returned, some one or something had removed your body and that of my child."

"Yas; et war the Perarer Patrol, or whatever-ye-call-her. She tuk us ter ther ruined haciender in ther Black Woods, an' berry'd ther babe, while she nursed me back ter life. Dunno why; she never even spoke ter me, ter 'splain which ner t'other. Arter I war well enuff ter shift fer myself, she show'd me the door, and sed 'git'; an' I got, in ginnywine style, bet yer good life on that."

"Then my child was really dead, too, eh?"

"Oh! yes; poor little cherubim got salivated wi' ther same bullet thet kerried off Mrs. Leone. Poor souls!"

For several moments Omaha Oll remained in silence; then he related his experience since the night of the massacre, including his late defence of the miners' caravan, against the attack of the ruffian herders, and his present mission to Del Norte.

"Yas, I argue, ye'll hev'troubulous times ter git thet kerryvan thru, ef they've got much gold aboard. Ham-bone thet petrified old Joner! Why these fellers'd run sixteen miles er minnit, now, ter git a smell o' ther ginnywine ariferous."

"Well, if there is to be more battle, here's what is going to take a hand in it!" Omaha said, grimly. "My mood is all right for battle, and so I shall go in."

"An' thes great destructive comet o' contagion, too."

"Can I depend upon you to assist me in getting this train safely through beyond Del Norte?"

"Yas, Dickey, my posey, ye can, ter ther end."

"Very well. You remain here, and keep a watch upon the town, while I ride back to the train and report. Look out for us toward midnight, and let us know if there are any hostile demonstrations."

Saying which Omaha galloped back to the train, which by this time had gained a couple of miles in their slow travel.

"Well, what are the prospects?" demanded Breck, as the Regulator rode up.

"Doubtful!" Omaha replied, briefly. "Be prepared to fight, anyhow. Are the outlaws still dogging?"

"Yes. They are not far behind; only the darkness hides them from view."

"Well, then, we may expect more unpleasant work, before the night is through!" was the reply, as the young Regulator rode on to join his men at the rear of the train.

And the caravan toiled on, until Del Norte lay just in front—gloomy and silent.

CHAPTER XV

THE GAMBLER'S TRAIL OF BLOOD

At this same hour of the caravan's approach to Del Norte, something was occurring at the homestead of the Harringtons, worthy of mention, and though the characters are merely incidental to the story, whose basis is the strange life-history of Deadwood Dick, we will here narrate them.

In the grand old Spanish parlour of the hacienda, three persons were gathered. Two were men; the third pretty Ella Harrington. All three were in a standing attitude; the two, El Gamin and Ella, had evidently just arisen upon the entrance of the third party, who was no other than the ex-Government Spy, Cunning Cass Cameron, who stood with hat in hand, near the door.

There was an evil expression upon the Spy's face as he stood and gazed at the two lovers.

El Gamin flushed a trifle, and the lady of his choice trembled violently.

"Well!" Cameron said at last, dwelling

slightly interrogatively upon the opening word, "this looks mutually interesting, doesn't it? How long had your billing and cooing been going on? Pray, Miss Harrington, be seated."

And laying his hat upon a stand, Cameron betook himself to a seat, upon an ottoman. Ella sank back upon a sofa; El Gamin still remained standing, his gaze turned fiercely upon the Government Spy.

Then El Gamin took a step nearer.

"Leave the room!" he commanded, hoarsely, pointing toward the door. "Leave! Go!"

"Oh! no, not yet, my beloved friend."

"Curse you!" El Gamin cried; "why do you come here? Go, I say! You lady is my betrothed wife. You have no claim upon her. Go, or I will cut your black heart out and give it to the dogs!"

"Oh! is that so? You are getting belligerent, eh? Don't sling my poor heart at the dogs, for I want the cats to have it."

El Gamin did not reply, but drew from his belt a pair of pistols, one of which he handed to Cameron.

"Oh! don't fight! don't fight! you will be killed!" screamed Ella, rushing in between them, frantically.

"Get out of the way!" El Gamin cried, fiercely.

"Hold! give the girl a chance to say which she loves best!" cried Cameron. "The other will withdraw."

Involuntarily the eyes of the two men turned upon Ella Harrington.

"Choose!" El Gamin said, hoarsely.

"I choose Mr. Redwood!" was the girl's reply, as she advanced toward the Spy. "I thought I cared for you, but I like him better!"

"But you shall not have him, you deceitful cat!" the Spaniard hissed, his face flaming redly. "You have trifled with my affection; you might better have played with a tiger! Stand ready, Sir Rival. You can only have the senora if you win her by my death!"

Cameron saw that the Gambler Prince was deeply in earnest; and a maddened Spaniard is perhaps the fiercest of furious men.

So the Spy nodded, and examined his revolver. He found it all right, and then faced the gambler.

"One! two! three!" El Gamin counted, and then fired, as did Cameron instantly. Both bullets pierced fleshy parts of the contestants' bodies, causing painful but not dangerous wounds.

Again the pistols came to a level, and a

flash and sharp double report echoed through the room. This time Cameron dropped upon one knee, but did not give utterance to a sound, as for the third time the pistols came to bear.

Bang! again the weapons of death rang out their spiteful warning, and while the infuriated gambler darted back at the sting of an unerring bullet, poor Cameron sank back upon the floor, lifeless.

A shriek of terror burst from the lips of Ella Harrington, as she saw the Spy fall, and saw El Gamin turn upon her, with a glare of demoniac joy in his eyes.

"Keep back, monster!" she gasped, retreating toward the door.

"Ha! ha! I have you now, and you shall be mine, willingly or unwillingly, you devil. What! do you mean to battle for your rights?" for Ella Harrington had seized two rapiers from a rack, and flinging one to the gambler, stood with the other in her grasp, her face white but resolute, and her bearing admirable.

"Yes, if you are not a coward you will give me a chance for my liberty, you ruffian!" she cried, sternly.

El Gamin seized the blade with a vile curse.

"I'll cut your head from your body!" he growled, savagely.

He made a lunge and a thrust, which were dexterously parried; then the young woman gave him a terrible rap on the side of the head, which caused him to reel back dizzily. But he recovered his equilibrium in an instant, and again rushed forward. This time his thrust was not rightly parried, and as a consequence Ella received a cut in the left thigh which laid open the flesh an inch deep.

With a cry she retreated a few steps, but the Spaniard followed her, perseveringly, a wild, terrible light in his eyes.

"You ruffian!" she gasped.

"You she wretch!" he taunted.

Then he made another deadly thrust, which with the skill of an experienced swordsman she parried, and laid his left arm bare to the bone.

With a howl of mingled pain and rage, he came on once more, like an infuriated bull of the arena leaps at the tormenting matadore.

He made a thrust, and she attempted to parry, but he caught her blade at a fault with his own, and hurled it from her grasp. The next instant his own blade was buried to the hilt through her heart, and she fell back to the floor, dead!

Withdrawing his sword, the wretch staggered back aghast at his sickening

crime; but with an iron will he the next moment mastered himself, and a low chuckling laugh escaped him.

"She thought to take me at a disadvantage with this blade, and kill me to avenge yon Government Spy!" he muttered, wiping away the perspiration from his brow. "Ha! *el diablo!*"

He leaped back in surprise, as a young man, stalwart and athletic, leaped into the room, and snatched up the blade that the El Gamin had hurled from poor Ella's grasp.

It was Philip Harrington, the younger of the two brothers, who had witnessed the last of the conflict, through an open casement, and had hastened to his sister's relief, only to arrive too late.

"Villain! hell-hound!" he cried, rushing at the blood-blinded gambler.

Then began a hot, furious contest, of thrusting, parrying, and feinting.

El Gamin was an expert, and it took but a moment to prove that Philip Harrington had had thorough education in sword exercise.

But, it could not last forever.

"Quarter!" at last articulated Philip Harrington, reeling back against the wall, and bleeding from half a dozen wounds—"enough!"

"Oh! no; you need a little more!" the victorious gambler cried, rushing on.

He made a thrust, fiercely, when Harrington was too weak to parry it, and ran the young farmer straight through the heart.

Then the Prince of Del Norte's gamblers turned and fled from the hacienda, out upon the prairie.

On toward Del Norte he sped, his hat off, his long hair waving in the breeze, his appearance truly more that of a madman than a sane person.

CHAPTER XVI

SOMETHING NOT EXPECTED

A DEATHLIKE stillness reigned over the town, as the caravan entered the prairie main street, on which were the few saloons and stores. Not a soul was seen abroad in the streets, and all was dark and apparently lifeless.

"Look sharp! watch on every side, for you are perhaps between two fires of death!" Omaha Oll cried along the line. "Guns ready! hearts brave! fire not until you are fired upon!"

"Listen! By Heaven! we are lost!"

cried Boss Breck, excitedly. "See! militia! They are in front, in the rear, and all around us!"

It was even so! A company of soldiery, with rattling bayonets, were charging down the street toward them; a company of mounted cavalry was bringing up the rear; while out of houses along the street issued more armed blue-coats, with triumphant cries.

The train came to a halt, at Omaha Oll's peremptory order, and both miners and Regulators grasped their guns; but this was useless, of course, for the militia outnumbered them three or four to one.

"In God's name, what does this mean?" demanded Breck, in great excitement. "Why are we thus stopped by the soldiers, and in this place?"

"We have yet that to learn!" Omaha Oll replied. "There is a screw loose, somewhere, and if we remain silent, I have no doubt we shall soon learn the reason."

Silence was accordingly enjoined throughout the train—all, as it were, were waiting to hear their sentence pronounced.

The soldiers all came to a standstill, with "ordered arms," at a stern ringing command, while the cavalry also drew rein. Then the same commanding voice was heard, again:

"Hello! there; train ahoy!"

"Well, what's wanted?" demanded Breck, from his position on one of the wagons. "Why in thunder do you thus stop an honest miners' caravan?"

"By that power vested in us by the Government to apprehend and arrest all those engaged in the production and transportation of illicit whisky!" was the ringing response. "You have forty barrels of untaxed whisky in your so-called 'honest miners' train,' and we command you to surrender, or take the consequences of a charge. Also, we want the young desperado you are harbouring with the delusion that he is a Regulator, he having allied himself with a band of roughs of that order. His name is *Omaha Oll, alias Deadwood Dick!*"

As may well be imagined, these words caused a sensation among those in the train. An exclamation of hearty indignation escaped the miners, at the suspicion of their being smugglers of illicit whisky. And the Regulators uttered a growl, as the words against their leader issued from the officer's lips.

"Your charge is insultin', you durned blue-coated loafer!" shouted Breck, from the wagon-top, "and if I had you here, I'd durned soon break your head. Thar's not

half the whisky in this train thar is in yer big gullet, an' I'll give a thousan' in pure dust if you'll find a gallon o' juice about our traps."

"What? Is it possible that you deny having illicit liquors in your wagons, sir?" shouted the officer. "Can we have made so great a mistake?"

"Reckon yer hev, fer sure," returned Breck. "Leastwise, ye won't find no juice in this kerryvan. We're goin' ter camp fer a couple o' days, hyar in town, an' ef ye'll wait till daylight, ye can examine our wagons."

"From where do you hail, Sir Miner?"

"From Danbury Split, in ther Rockies, ef it's any o' your bizness. B'en thar now nigh six year."

"Well, there is something strange here indeed!" said the officer, leaving his command, and riding close to the train. "My name is Fullerton, and it is my business to look to this whisky business. I received warning to meet a smuggling train here, to-night, and thus, if we have made a mistake, you see how it is. But we know that Deadwood Dick is with you, and we demand his surrender. His Regulators we do not want. They have, in reality, done the San Luis valley a service by warring against the Prairie League, and also praise is due to Deadwood Dick for his evident reformation. But his work up at Deadwood was too criminal to allow of his going about a free man, and it is our duty as soldiers to arrest him, according to law!"

"I've nothin' ter say about that!" Boss Breck replied, "only that he saved our lives an' money, an' ef he wants muscle an' backbone ter defend hisself with, we'd be brutes not ter stick by him. Ye'd better cl'ar out an' let ther young feller alone, ossifer, fer he'll make ye trubble afore you git him!"

"No! he'll make no trouble!" was Omaha Oll's response, in a clear, ringing voice. "I'll not imperil the rest of you by resistance, *but will surrender!* Come forward, Sir Officer, if you want me!"

"Don't surrender! We'll stand by you with our lives!" cried both miners and Regulators, in a voice. "You'll only be strung up if you surrender!"

"Let 'em string!" was the reckless reply. "I've nothing to live for. My wife and child have both been innocently murdered, and there is nothing to make life desirable. If I regret anything, it is that I shall be unable to assist in the extermination of the ruffians of the Prairie League!"

Colonel Fullerton now rode up, accompanied by half a dozen dismounted privates,

and, true to his promise, Omaha delivered himself, and was handcuffed. Then, after bidding adieu to the Regulators and miners, he was marched away to the camp of the military, which was pitched on the prairie, south of the town. The soldiers followed, and so did the caravan, the miners going into camp not far from that of the military, for not one was there among the miners or Regulators who was less than interested in the welfare of Deadwood Dick.

To them he had endeared himself by his gentlemanly bearing, courage and skill; that he must die seemed a shame—an outrage.

And they meant to be with him at the last.

Omaha was thrown into a tent by himself, and left alone; but a cordon of guards were set around his prison, without, for Colonel Fullerton was bound that the dare-devil of the Black Hills should not escape him, as he had many times escaped his captors in the past.

Dick was not down-hearted, but took things coolly. He sat in his prison, now, whistling a song that had been a favourite with Leone, and reflecting upon what was to come.

In the morning, he calculated, a court-martial trial would be given him, and he would be convicted, and shot.

He thought of Avalanche, and wondered where the old scout was keeping himself. Surely if he were in Del Norte, he must have been attracted by the confusion, and learned of his capture.

For a couple of hours Dick lay thus, his mind busied with the past and present; then he dropped off into a sound sleep, for he was much fatigued. When he awoke it was with a start.

A cold hand had touched his face, and aroused him.

"'Sh!" cautioned a voice, in a shrill whisper; "make no noise. I am a friend come to save you. I am El Gamin."

"Why have you come here?" Dick demanded, raising himself to a sitting posture. "I do not want to escape. Your effort is useless!"

"What! do you mean to say you do not care for life and liberty?"

"Ay, I mean just that!" was the firm reply of the prisoner. "I want to die. I am weary of this hunted life. For the last two years I have been an outcast upon the face of the earth. I have no home now, nor friends here upon earth, and I do not care to stay. Up in the keeping of God I have a darling wife and child, and I hope for a place with them, if I can die now!"

El Gamin was strangely affected. He sat beside the prisoner, buried in deep thought.

"I wish that I might hope for a place up there with you," he replied, "but I am too irretrievably bad. Then you won't accept of liberty?"

"No, thanking you all the same."

"Well, then, good-bye. I admired you, and that is why I ventured here. If die you will, be brave, and remember that, base wretch and murderer though he is, you have a friend in El Gamin."

Then the gambler glided away, and that was the last Deadwood Dick ever saw of him.

Without difficulty El Gamin managed to escape from the prison-tent, and wended his way along over the prairie.

For half an hour he wandered along; then suddenly, ere he had any warning of danger, he was fiercely attacked by a half-dozen burly herders, whose only weapons were knives.

The first faint tinges of dawn streaking the east, gave the gambler an idea who they were, for a short distance away Prairie Patrol sat upon her white horse, urging on her "tools."

Leaping back with the agility of a panther, El Gamin drew his revolvers, and fired. Down went two of his assailants at first fire. Again he fired; one fell; the other unerring bullet sped along and pierced the breast of the mysterious Prairie Patrol. With a dying scream she sank from the saddle to the ground, and becoming frightened, her horse dashed wildly away over the prairie.

Two more foes had the Spaniard, pressing him so hard that he could not use his revolver. Becoming desperate, as he saw that certain death was inevitable unless he could make a break, he clubbed the revolver, and hurled it fiercely at the head of one of the herders, while at the same instant he took a backward step and leaped upon the other.

The flying missile felled the one ruffian like a log to the ground.

Tearing the knife from the hand of the other, with strength prodigious, the gambler buried it into the outlaw's heart, and thus ended the unequal contest.

An hour later, just when the cold December sun arose gloriously from out its eastern bed, El Gamin approached a solitary cottonwood which stood miles inland from the Rio Grande, and whose wide-spreading branches looked cheerful.

Under the shelter of these he sat himself upon the grass, and busied himself in clean-

ing his weapons, which of late had done him such dreadful service.

In the early morning following El Gamin's visit, Deadwood Dick was led forth from his tent, by a guard of soldiers, to the village plaza, which was in the centre of the town. Here the military and townspeople were all assembled, to witness the merely formal trial of the daring ex-outlaw.

Curious eyes were bent upon the young man, for some signs of agitation were apprehended, but in this all were disappointed. Not a tremor passed over Harris's face, as he was placed upon the witness stand, confronted by the multitude; but he smiled and put out one released hand, as there was a parting in the crowd, and Old Avalanche came up followed by his goat.

"Great ham-bone thet Joner gnawed on!" was the old scout's greatly surprised exclamation. How? which—how did ye git inter this tarnal predickament, boyee?"

Deadwood Dick laughed one of his peculiar expressive little laughs.

"Well, I got caught by these law-abiding emissaries of Uncle Sam, Alva, and they made bold to assert that they wanted me, which assertion I could not gainsay; so, accordingly, I gave up, and let 'em take me into custody!"

"Which showed what a durn blasted fule ye aire. Great Jerusallumm! I wouldn't 'a' thort it uv you!"

"But, you know, old friend, that I have nothing to live for. The faster pass the days, the more I want to be with Leone and my boy."

"Oh! ye'll git thar, no doubt!" Avalanche replied grimly, "ef ye let these durned scullions hev their way erbout it. Let me jest put a lively flea inter yer organs o' hearing."

Saying which, the Annihilator whispered a few words in the prisoner's ear, that caused him to start violently and grow white.

"Not dead—*Leone not dead*, you say?" he gasped, a wild, joyful, hopeful light shining from his eyes.

"I sed et, I reckon!" the veteran scout replied; "leastwise, thes 'ere paper luks rather suspiciously like it. Read," and he held a small strip of paper up so that Dick could see.

These were the words inscribed:

"Am a prisoner—for God's sake, rescue me from a horrible captivity. My captor's name is Hawk Harrington. Search for me in the Black Hills, whither he is taking me.

LEONE HARRIS."

"Oh! Heaven, I am to die, leaving her a prisoner!" Deadwood Dick groaned.

"Don't be ter sure o' thet, Dickey, boy. Thar's many a slip 'twixt the tarantler juice an' ther lip uv an absorber o' moisture, as hes often been proven, an' 'tain't sworn to thet ye're bound ter swing, yet. An' ef ye do, I'll find yer wife, an' take gude keer o' her. Great ham bones, yes. But good-by, now, fer them soldiers aire lukin' at me as ef I war a hoss-thief, instead uv a devastatin' eppydemic o' ther peraries. Good-by, an' keep yer eyes open."

And giving Dick a warm hand-shake, the scout turned away and vanished in the crowd.

The trial was as quick as it was decisive. The Prairie court found Omaha Oll to be Deadwood Dick, and as Deadwood Dick had richly merited death a hundred times, he was now summarily ordered to be shot. The sentence, as pronounced by Fullerton was:

"I sentence you to death one hour hence. You shall be shot by six long-range rifles, in the hands of my sharp-shooters, at a distance of two hundred yards."

With these words the trial was ended, and the crowd gradually dispersed, evidently greatly pleased at the idea of this long-range practice on a human body.

Dick was taken back to his prison-tent, and left alone.

There chanced to be an ex-chaplain with the command, and he visited the prisoner and offered consolation, which Dick gratefully accepted. It seemed strange to him to be preparing for eternity. An hour ago he had rejoiced at the prospect of meeting Leone; now that she was living, he yearned to live, but it was too late. His sentence had been passed, and he would have no chance to escape.

Death stared him in the face, and he could but meet it.

He wondered where Old Avalanche was all this time. What mischief was the old King of Rangers planning?

That he was staying in the background without some purpose Dick was unwilling to think, and a strong hope arose in his breast that perhaps the old scout was planning for his escape.

But this hope was dissipated, when the

soldiers came to lead him out to his execution. Nothing, now, thought he, could save him from death.

He was led through camp, and two hundred yards out upon the keen wintry prairie, where a stake had been driven, upon the edge of a rushing little tributary creek, which a mile below flowed into the Rio Grande del Norte.

To this stake he was firmly lashed with strong cords.

"I am sorry for you, young man!" Colonel Fullerton said, gravely. "It is a pity to see a young man like you shot when life is so precious."

"Oh! you needn't be. I don't hanker after your sorrow, nor your words of condolence!" Dick replied coolly. "Probably, if I were to come to life after you end my days, I should be just mean enough to drop you off of the list of the living."

"I guess you won't do any one any harm in the future!" was the grim attempt at satire of the colonel. "Will you have your eyes blindfolded?"

"No. *I want to see the machine work!*"

Accordingly Dick was left alone, tied to the stake, while the soldiers and the colonel retired to the shooting-line, full two hundred yards away.

While they were striding thither, a dripping human form crawled from the stream at Dick's back, and a familiar voice exclaimed:

"Courage, Dickey, boyee! I'll hev ye out o' this, d'rectly."

Creeping into the tall grass at the back of the prisoner, the old Annihilator gave the cord a slash or two, and Dick was free!

Sinking to the ground he rolled into the stream, Avalanche in the lead, and an instant later they crept into the bushes on the opposite side of the stream and almost the first warning the soldiers had was, when on looking around at a shrill yell of defiance, they saw two horsemen spurring away, madly, over the prairie. Soon they passed wholly from view.

Omaha Oll, and the ex-road-agent, Deadwood Dick, and the Annihilator, Old Avalanche, disappeared, and nevermore were they seen in the country of the Rio Grande del Norte.

THE END

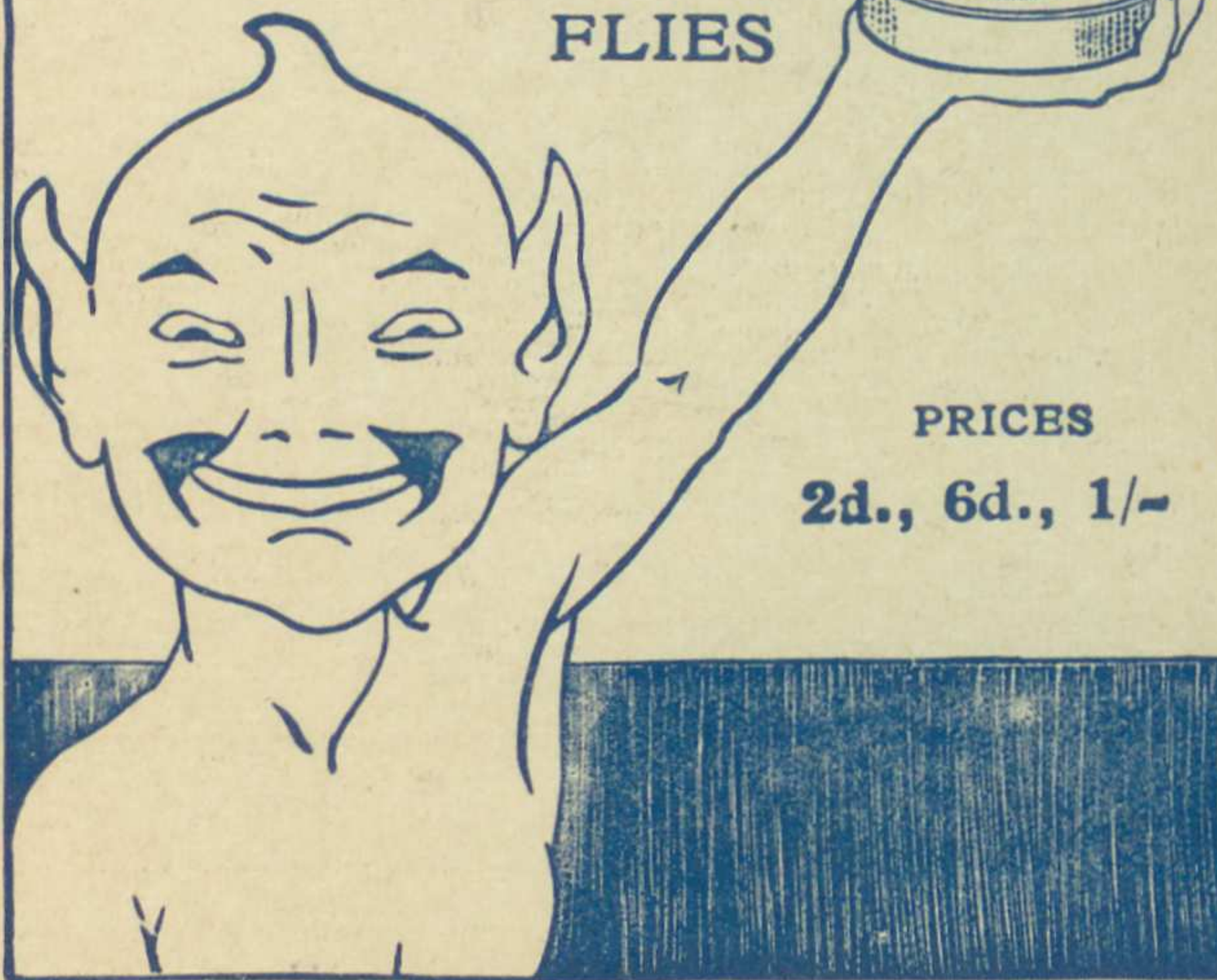
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